

LGBT Cohousing of San Francisco Area

By Alan Vanness

A network of gay or LGBT Cohousing neighborhoods is being created in the San Francisco region. These small communities are being developed from the grassroots, by local lesbians and gay men. It is based upon a vision of small, less expensive homes of gays and lesbians grouped together. It's a vision of enjoying diverse personalities of friends who have many things in common. It is a vision of simplifying life. This is a real-world project with a lot of potential for building neighborhood friendships.

Like other Cohousing neighborhoods built all across America and in Europe, it is connected with a popular movement. It was transplanted to the U.S. from Denmark. Cohousing has been adapted to the needs and tastes of Americans, largely due to the work of Katie McCamant and Charles Durrett, architects in Berkeley and in Nevada City CA.

Although several dozen Cohousing neighborhoods have been built in the last two decades, it is still not quite recognized as "mainstream". However, Cohousing is seen everywhere, as an attractive, liveable form of old-fashioned neighborhood. "What is Cohousing?" This is still a question that is often heard.

Essentially, Cohousing is a residential neighborhood, initiated and planned by friends and new friends. They share a vision of compatible housing goals, desire to know these neighbors, utilizing their strengths. This leads to a lot of creative, enjoyable work in planning together. Cohousers get ample exposure to their neighbors, appreciating all of the diverse personalities, while moving toward their basic, shared "village goals".

This new LGBT "gay plus straight Cohousing" shares in the simple elements. One has one's small or large private home. Neighbors enjoy camaraderie at weekly dinners and other social activities in the Common House (shared facility, if feasible in the building budget). Cohousers sign-up for 3 hours of tasks per month. Also, they pair-up to cook a neighborhood dinner (or clean up), once a month. Finally, there is an opportunity to be on a committee. These help to keep the place maintained, in liaison with the Cohousing Owners' Association. This governing of the development is typically either democratic or run by consensus.

For the gay community of the San Francisco region, this new series of neighborhoods will develop in different in-fill locations. Like everyone, LGBT people need to commute to work and be near family, friends and even their kid's schools. Much planning is yet to be done on these S.F. and suburban Cohousing sites. We continue to network, outreach and market in more ways, to attract LGBT people to the potential sites. The impetus was originally from men from the CMG, that is, The California Men's Gathering (www.thecmg.org)

The CMG is a mens' movement, mostly but not exclusively for gay men. With members from all over California, the CMG's men network and provide social events, large seasonal gatherings, and personal-growth workshops. Inevitably, one of these

positive, creative directions was to get together to shape gay or LGBT neighborhoods. Now attracting more LGBT members from all around the Bay area, Gay Cohousing is poised to deepen LGBT friendships in new, small neighborhoods of 8 or up to 36 homes each.

How is LGBT Cohousing different from other Cohousing groups? Obviously, this one is predominantly gay...LGBT, potentially with gay-friendly straight residents too. We aim for lowered prices in home purchase. We are planning to use SIPs construction (Structural Insulated Panels) for high quality, green-built homes at reasonable cost. For information about this advanced building approach, go to www.altbuild.com. We're also open to maximizing the affordability by simplifying the neighborhood design, with either small cottages or attached townhouses, possibly finding alternatives with no common house. Very likely, there will be an even greater use of creative landscape design and architectural features than in more familiar Cohousing neighborhoods. That is, gay people often take a great deal of pride in exhibiting style and creativity in their surroundings!

Thus far, with no publicity or advertising, LGBT Cohousing has networked among a few gay groups. It has most of the needed residents for its first East Bay site. That site selection has not been finalized, but site features, cost, municipal cooperation and location are all critically important. As more lesbian and gay members are attracted to Cohousing features and ethos, other suitable in-fill sites in suburban counties must be found. For most of our LGBT members, sane commuting is essential, from transit-oriented development sites.

In addition to the smart growth concerns, the first LGBT Cohousing will offer community to gay people from about age- range 35 to 75. Most have careers, but some are retired. Some residents-to-be are single...others have partners. Some choose our sites close to old, familiar areas, while others are willing to move a little bit farther from "home". All of these in the first group do put a high priority on maximum affordability.

The low cost objective depends upon many factors. First, willingness to have a smaller home (yet green and stylish) will reduce the price. We search for good locations for building sites; yes, land is costly! Add the costs of building permits and for the services of talented development professionals, of course. Don't forget all of the costs of preparing the building site, infrastructure and construction of foundations.

For the next LGBT Cohousing groups, there will be opportunities to choose other types of focus. Beyond maximizing affordability, a group may opt instead for pricier modernist chic in architecture. This is reflected in features one sees in *Sunset* or *Dwell* magazines. Other Cohousing groups may easily choose a special demographic focus, to be ages 60-upward, retired or within an all- lesbian neighborhood or all gay male grouping, plus any straight people who are friendly progressives. Cultural traditionalists probably will not apply, of course.

Again, a very notable distinction for the first LGBT neighborhoods is the preference for some simplicity and lowered prices. Both in California and specifically in the San Francisco area, we are tired of the highest real estate price tags in the nation. Gay retirement developments are no exception to this reality. They are geared and marketed

to very affluent, upscale gay and lesbian demographics. Those are very expensive and very toney, whether in Palm Springs, Santa Fe or in the local gay retirement developments.

Another aspect: our environmental concerns. In their planning, S.F. area LGBT Cohousing aims to incorporate many green building features. First, in Structural Insulated Panels home construction, there is a great reduction of material waste. On -site- built, stick-framed homes produce a lot of left-over pieces that are a challenge to recycle. SIPs homes also have extremely high insulation values, thus reducing energy use for heating or cooling. Other facets of green Cohousing are the use of supplemental solar energy and low v.o.c. paints and materials. Include also the benefits of non-intensive watering for types of plants which are better-suited to our climate. In the private and shared gardens, irrigation with graywater is the preferred, advanced alternative, if allowed in the municipal codes. This is an incomplete list of LGBT Cohousing's environmental lower- impact features.

In summary, seriously consider all of the facets and attractions of gay / LGBT Cohousing.

- Attractive small / medium sized homes, with intelligently- designed landscaping.
- Greater value and lower price of homes.
- Balance of privacy and deeper connections with friends and neighbors.
- Diverse, fascinating LGBT neighbors, plus gay-friendly straight friends.
- Shared amenities, spa, gardens, and perhaps a pool and common house.
- Green eco-building approach, plus solar supplemental energy.
- Locations of sites, oriented to transit ("t.o.d." development.)
- All in all, LGBT Cohousing in the San Francisco area is not utopian. But it will develop healthy neighborhoods with happier gay and lesbian residents! Maybe even happier, or at least gay-er, than a hundred other Cohousing communities!

For more information about LGBT Cohousing in the San Francisco Area, please go to Google Groups, enter sf-lgbt-cohousing as the Group name in order to read more about us...and then apply for admission. Our website will be available soon, with additional information about joining our various "location groups". Also, you may call Alan at 925-969-7549, or send e-mail inquiries to alanvaness@sbcglobal.net