

## **A New World Community in Seattle, Washington**

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Cohousing communities started in the 'Old World', but they are spreading fast in the 'New World'. The first one was established in Denmark in 1972. The Danish cohousing model was exported to the United States through a book published in 1988 by Kathryn Mc Camant and Charles Durrett, who had spent a year studying cohousing communities in Denmark and then went on a speaking tour in the USA and Canada. One of their first stops was Seattle, in the Pacific NorthWest. Cohousing communities have been developing for 25 years : by 2005, there were 165 communities in the U.S.A., with a concentration in California (37), Washington State (17) and Massachussets (15). This year, the numbers have increased to 186 communities in the USA, with the fastest growth in California (42).<sup>1</sup>

Cohousing communities have a number of common features. Designed and managed by residents, they are « intentional neighbourhoods » : people consciously choose living as a community. The physical layout and orientation of the buildings encourage the sense of community, with a cluster of homes around a pedestrian street. The Common house and facilities are centrally placed and used daily. Management by residents includes common meals and maintenance, through a general meeting and committee meetings. The structure is non-hierarchical and decision-making is achieved by consensus. Cohousing communities are not 'communes' : individuals and families have their own houses or flats ; and they are not a source of income for their members.

### **Jackson Place Cohousing, Hiawatha Place South (Seattle, Washington)**

Designed and managed by residents, Jackson Place Cohousing is home to 27 households clustered on a hillside, leaving shared open spaces – pedestrian ways, gardens, patio next to the 'common house'. Cars are parked on the periphery and in two common garages. Most residents walk, bike or take the bus to go to work in nearby Downtown Seattle. Children catch the schoolbus. In the words of a resident, « it's a place where we know our neighbors, a place where we can enjoy a rich sense of community and contribute to a more sustainable world ».

#### **Landmarks :**

- 1997 : three families create Seattle Cohousing but fail to agree on suitable land (urban or suburban ?) for their project
- July 1998 : the initial group purchases 1.25 acres in a somewhat derelict urban area close to Downtown Seattle. They advertise for people to join and change the name
- July 2000 : groundbreaking
- Autumn 2001 : the first families move in

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<sup>1</sup> [http://directory.cohousing.org/us\\_list/all\\_us.php](http://directory.cohousing.org/us_list/all_us.php) (consulted July 4th 2006), Community Directory is part of the announcement of the July 2006 national conference, 'Living in Cohousing – A Model for a Sustainable Planet'.

- Summer 2005 : 27 units, 65 residents (50 adults and 15 children), 3 'renters' and a few animals.

### **The interviews :**

Sharing their life for one month (as a result of a flat exchange) made it possible for me to carry out a survey as a participant observer, using 16 taped interviews (July 2005) to try and identify hopes, difficulties, achievements and limitations.<sup>2</sup> The impact is summarized by the phrase : « We set out to change our world, and now community is changing us » (Interview). And they all say : « I can't *imagine* living anywhere else ».

### **Jackson Place Cohousing Community - a portrait :**

The youngest resident is 3 months old, the oldest in his seventies, only a handful are retired. Young couples without children, families with one or two children (aged 3 months - 12 years), one divorced and one single mother, some single women, a few older people. Most adults are in middle-class jobs : in computer software (Seattle is home to Microsoft and Amazon), administration, education, health and social work. There is a barrister, a private investigator and a retired engineer. One young couple take it in turns to have a job outside and to run the home (as « household manager and domestic engineer »). Some work from home, one of them using the office in the Common house, and appreciate the presence of the community which prevents isolation.

Home size varies, from two-bedroom flats to four-bedroom town houses on two or three levels. The flats are in the Common house block, the town houses on either side of the pedestrian way, with gardens in front and at the back. Common spaces include a large terrace, flower beds, play area and a vegetable garden. The residents have bought their homes, and some have « a renter » to help them pay the mortgage. The renters are invited to join in the community life (meals, meetings), and some play an active part. There is no racial diversity, though the initial group included an African American (who dropped out for economic reasons) – but one family includes two adopted Asian children.

The community has brought together a diversity of people : Christians of various denominations (among whom several Quakers, Unitarians, Catholics), a Buddhist and some atheists. When asked what united everybody, one respondent remarked : « I know that we're all democrats. I think that people want to eat organically – that's one common denominator. People don't want to use toxins anywhere around the property. People are very concerned about raising their children in a gentle and loving and understanding fashion... People are very ethical about money. Even though some are poorer than others here, they have a great deal of integrity about money » (S. S.). Some are vegetarian, and the common meals provide a vegetarian menu. All speak of « sustainable development » and, with two

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<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire used was a set of 12 questions : 1- When did you join J.P.C ? 2- How did you hear about it ? 3- What were your initial motivations ? 4- personal questions on age, job, marital status, children, ownership, size of home, car ownership. 5- How often do you eat in/ cook/ clean etc. ? 6- How often do you go to meetings, what do you think of meetings ? 7- What common spaces do you use, what do you think of common areas ? 8- What is the point of continuing living here ? 9- What do you appreciate most ? 10- What is/are the most difficult thing/s in JCP ? 11- What do you think of the group house for the mentally disabled young men? 12- Any other remark ?

exceptions, they all walk, bike or take public transport to get to work – this is made easy by the location of Jackson Place Cohousing in the International District, a 10-minute bus ride to Downtown Seattle.

### **Living in Cohousing at Jackson Place**

They chose to join for a variety of reasons : some of them had heard about Cohousing and made a deliberate choice to join in the planning stages of the project, others came to it late when only few units were left, attracted by the neighbourliness they expected to find and the idea of sharing resources. Four years after moving in, they all use the common facilities (common kitchen, dining room, sitting room with library and television, children's playroom, laundry, office, workshop, and even a small art gallery with one resident's collection of native American art), though not all to the same extent.

One unit is shared by three young disabled men whose families have arranged for paid care for them : they do their share of the chores and fit in well. What initially created a problem was the corporate ownership of that unit, which implied that a « non-profit corporation » owned a home and designated tenants, with no community control. The fears over the behaviour of the 'disabled tenants' evaporated when people got to know them. Some of the parents even expressed satisfaction that their children had got to live alongside disabled people and learnt to interact with them.

Jackson Place has an extensive meal programme : an evening meal for \$3 (\$1 for children) (Monday to Thursday) and one weekend meal, with occasional barbecues, birthday and other celebrations. Some 40 (out of 55) residents regularly eat together. Residents share the cooking, cleaning the kitchen, cleaning the common house and other common living areas, the upkeep of the grounds on « landscape day ».

The kitchen committee meets at least once a month and organises the cooking and cleaning teams – a Meals and Meeting schedule<sup>3</sup> comes out every fortnight, listing menus, kitchen teams (head cook, second cook and 2 helpers for each meal), meetings, birthdays and any other event. Residents sign in for the meals they choose to eat, and for workshifts (twice a month if they eat most meals), they can have « late plates » if they can't get back for 6.30pm, they can indicate special requirements... A five-page document, « JPC Meals Program – How it works », defines the organisation : how and when food is ordered and delivered, who is in charge of shopping lists, meeting deliveries etc. Thursday night is « Creativity night where the goal is to use up leftovers and existing pantry ingredients without pre-planning or ordering », and anybody can take home what is left on that night. A complex system, which works well and produces wholesome and imaginative meals which most people share several times a week. Jackson people are proud of their Meals programme : « We never had any incident of food-borne illnesses », « It's the most amount of scheduled meals that any cohousing community has ». A few respondents claimed they never missed a meal except when they were away on holiday.

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<sup>3</sup> See document.

Once a month, on a Sunday afternoon, the Business meeting brings everybody together : it is usually attended by at least one member of every household and always followed by a common dinner. The various committees (Coordinating committee, Kitchen committee, Finance committee, Care committee, Process Committee, Kids' team, Workshop team, Landscape team) meet every other week or less, depending on the projects in hand and problems to be worked through. The « Diversity committee », which was attempting to diversify the membership of the community to include Asians, African Americans, gays and lesbians, failed to produce any results and disbanded. In all committees and in the Business meeting, decision is by consensus, which is time-consuming but ensures that the group doesn't split with a disgruntled minority. However, « people work on how to achieve process » : there is a committee working on how to win consensus, and « the biggest tension is between those who are eager to get things done and those who want to have everybody on board before getting moving ». When a project has come up at several business meetings and failed to win support (for example, building a gate to the terrace), it is abandoned. When nobody has volunteered for small repair jobs for 30 days after community approval, money is made available to hire a paid outsider and the Finance committee budgets for it.

### **What they think about their life in Cohousing**

Acceptance, affection, tolerance : that is found in all interviews, and summarised by one of them : « I'm pretty consistently happy here, and the best thing about it is that I have never in my life experienced the kind of affection and respect and consideration that I've found here. Never. No matter what I do, whether I screw up... I'm accepted and not judged ». 'Appreciation' is in fact formally part of the Business meeting : residents thank individuals or the community for help given with small practical problems or support and solidarity.

They all mentioned sharing good food, coming home to a cooked dinner and cooking only twice a month for the community . Companionship for children and single mothers, was especially emphasized by the three families that have broken up since 2001 : « When he left, I still had a sense of security, a sense of support. I felt that if I didn't find a new partner, I could still have a rich life... My son 'owns cohousing', he is accepted everywhere ». The benefits to children are underlined : « Children born in cohousing are very different from children born in other situations. I'm amazed how they're developing, how they relate easily to each other and other adults. They're in a safe community » , insist K. and B, who « looked after A. in the morning and put him on the school bus – they're a little like grandparents for my children » (single mother).

Neighbourliness, the trading of skills within the community, easy social interactions are a welcome contrast with the isolation experienced in their previous condominium flats or single-family houses. But the support provided by the community is all the more precious in times of illness and death – and this is documented by several articles in the monthly magazine *Cohousing*<sup>4</sup>. At Jackson, a young man died in July 2004 after a long period of illness. Throughout the ordeal, spontaneous and organised support took many forms : a constant flow of visits, riding his wife to the

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<sup>4</sup> « My community has continued to look after me, now three months since her death. I know that I am loved and never alone. There is always someone I can talk with, should I need to ». David Dobkin, 'Final Passage in Cohousing', *CoHousing*, Volume 14, N° 2, Fall 2001, p. 19.

hospital and baby-sitting for their son, providing free packed lunches and evening meals, money raising, and just a silent presence when needed. Similarly, when another young couple lost a baby, again the community rallied together and provided welcome support. All say that these experiences reinforced the community feeling. One respondent defined the closeness which has developed and the impact on her : « I can't imagine living the way I used to live. I've made a switch in my heart and soul and mind. I want the thread of people's lives entwining with my own in a day to day kind of thing. I will have to continue living here ».

There was only one discordant voice in the interviews : « I'm disappointed with the Cohousing experience because I do not get the support I had hoped for as a single mother with two children with a handicap... Some children have been quite aggressive with A. who has many difficulties (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and deafness) and is in therapy. Some parents have been very critical. A few are supportive, though ». She says she is « not bitter, just sad that it didn't work better », thought of moving away, but decided to stay on.

Another cause of frustration voiced by several respondents concerns the number and length of meetings (« I don't care for them, they're tedious, but I go »), and the slowness of the consensus process of decision-making. But few opt out of meetings altogether, because they are necessary to keep things going. There is still the feeling of building and improving the environment : redecorating the dining room which is also used for community meetings and private occasions, building an adventure playground, organising a crafts room, improving the workshop, creating a « hot tub ». And there are ways of by-passing long discussions : « I'm learning about how I subvert : I want to donate a piano and I'm not going to check with anybody – I'll just bring it... »

### **Some conclusions**

A neighbourhood where one gets a sense of belonging : this is the dominant personal impression after sharing their life for a month, reading through their library, speaking with most of them and formally interviewing one third of the adults in the community : a pleasant environment, a friendly welcome, plenty of privacy when wanted, help galore about where to go, what to see, including the loan of a car and guided tours ; taking turns cooking and observing democracy in action by joining in the business meeting and various activities.

Is this a Utopian community ? They definitely say « No ; that's how everybody should live, it's like living with an extended family ». The emphasis is never on theory, but always on practical problems to be solved : how to enhance the feeling of community while protecting privacy, how to protect the environment and share resources by making the best choices ( a well-equipped common kitchen, laundry, workshop save on buying expensive consumer goods for individual homes which can thus be 'downsized' - though some people have their own washing-machine to save them carrying their laundry to the far end of the pedestrian alley). There is an awareness of ecological concerns : energy saving was instrumental in the choice of insulation and building materials, organic food is bought in bulk for common meals and waste is reduced by composting and recycling, children's clothing and all sorts of items are offered when no longer needed, carpooling is frequent - formal or informal, simple

day-to-day borrowing from neighbours reduces trips by car to the local shops : all this leading to what they call « living more sustainably ».

This constant interaction is part of the practical philosophy of sharing the same common space, and comes naturally as a result of having taken part in defining the project, designing the plans and followed all the steps for over two years : meetings and discussions over planning had already created a community of people who were learning to know one another and work together. And the same practical approach helps solve problems and work out consensus decisions. There are no common ideological beliefs, no charismatic leader, just the « desire for a more practical and social home environment » (McCamant & Durrett, 17) to « remedy the isolation and loneliness of our culture through a renewed commitment to community » (McCamant & Durrett, 201), and create a diverse community with children and adults of all ages – a cross section of young and old, families and single people.

Rethinking the American dream and sharing it : the pioneers of cohousing use websites, meetings, conferences, publications<sup>4</sup> to spread the word<sup>5</sup>. The movement is also attempting to diversify, inspiring alternatives : one is to cater for the homeless through the rehabilitation of a large Victorian building in San Francisco « for use as Single Room Occupancy with kitchen and living space shared by all » acting as «rented low-cost transitional housing that allows residents a stable environment in which to begin rebuilding their lives » (McCamant & Durrett, 280). A similar project « intended to house 12 very-low-income single-parent households » giving them « affordable rental housing along with the support that comes with a sense of community and shared experience » (McCamant & Durrett, 280). And Charles Durrett's vision of 'Cohousing 2020' suggests thousands of projects influenced by cohousing, the model being adapted to different publics: women and children recovering from abusive households, senior housing developments and Native American Indian projects<sup>6</sup> ; And he concludes that « it's such an important model for cooperation, conviviality, and sustainability ».

### Sources

McCamant Kathryn and Durrett Charles, *Cohousing, A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, Berkeley : Ten Speed Press, 1988.

Meltzer Graham, *Sustainable community, Learning from the cohousing model*, Victoria : Trafford, 2004.

Stewart Danièle, 'Habitat et Ecologie : Le « Co-housing » aux Etats-Unis', *Revue française d'Etudes américaines*, N° 94, Décembre 2002, pp.113-127.

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<sup>5</sup> Like the magazines *CoHousing*, *Journal of the Cohousing Association of the United States*, *Communities*, *Journal of Cooperative Living*, or *Community Resources* (*Journal of the Northwest Intentional Communities Association*), *The Fellowship for Intentional Communities*, and the regional and national conferences organised by these Associations.

<sup>6</sup> « Eighty tribes were represented from all over the country and Canada. What inspired them was cohousing, not 'affordable housing', although affordability was an issue », Charles Durrett, North American Cohousing Conference, 'Co-creating a viable society', *CoHousing*, Fall 2001, Vol. 14, N° 2, p. 37.

**A photo gallery of the Jackson co-housing project, by Andrée Shepherd**

*Editor's note : These pictures are a selection from the exhibition shown during the New World Visions conference in December 2005.*



**Adopt-a-street sign**

**Co-housing blueprint for Jackson Place**



**View from Hiawatha Street**



**Insider's view of the co-housing ensemble**



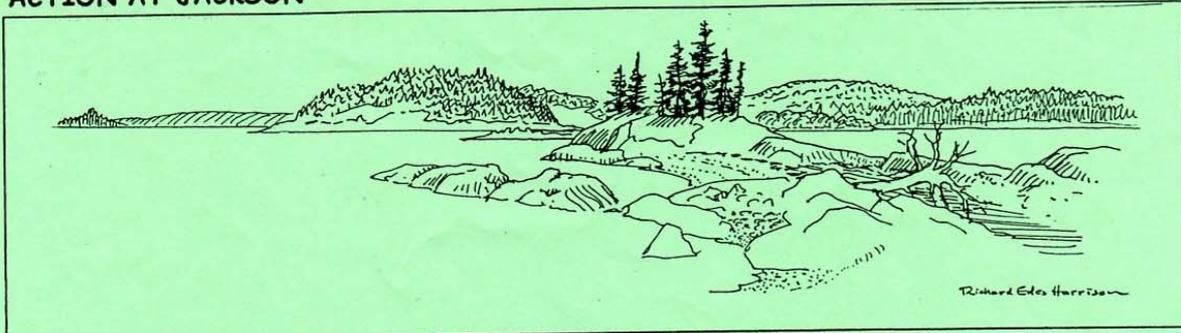
**Residents stop to chat in pedestrian area**



**Another view of pedestrian areas**

**ACTION AT JACKSON**

**Dates: Jul 25 - Aug 7 '05**



**MEALS PROGRAM AND MEETING SCHEDULE**

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
<b>25</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Meal</b> Zuke Tina Cass., Beets & carrots Fruit, Gr. Salad Bread Cook # 1 <b>Betsy</b> Cook #2 <b>Jonathan</b> Clean # 1 <b>Linda AY</b> Clean # 2 <b>Steve D</b> Kidcare:  <b>Meetings:</b> 7:30pm Process CHLR B'day: <b>CAMERON</b>	<b>Meal</b> Meat & pasta cass (Veg Alt.), Veggie, Gr. Salad Cook # 1 <b>Kathy</b> Cook #2 <b>Oksana</b> Clean # 1 <b>Matt +</b> Clean # 2 <b>Jim</b> Kidcare:  <b>Meetings</b> 7:30pm Community CHLR	<b>Meal - SPECIAL</b> Lamb or tofu curry, Wh. Rice, Gr. Veg Nectarine/Blueberry Cobbler Cook # 1 <b>*Andre*</b> Cook # 2 <b>Maid &amp; Bill</b> Clean # 1 <b>Pat</b> Clean # 2 <b>Alison</b> Kidcare:  <b>Meetings</b> Columbia City Farmers Market 3-7pm every Wed.	<b>Meal</b> Creativity & dessert Cook # 1 <b>Leslie</b> Cook # 2 <b>Barb</b> Clean # 1 <b>Louise</b> Clean # 2 <b>?</b> Kidcare: <b>Leah</b> <b>Meetings</b>	<b>Function</b> Central Cinema - Showing: <b>Mostly Martha</b> Comedy about food, family, & friends. 6:30 & 9  B'day: <b>JULIANNA</b>	<b>Meal - NO</b> Cook #1 Cook #2 Clean #1 Clean #2  <b>Torchlight                      Parade 7:30</b>	<b>Meal - Dinner</b> Chicken/Tofu w/ rice, morrocan carrots, 7-layer bean dip w/ veggie chips Cook # 1 <b>Maid</b> Cook # 2 <b>Elizabeth</b> Clean # 1 <b>Susan</b> Clean #2 <b>Steve M</b>  Yoga w/ Elizabeth 9-10am - donation  <b>BIZ MEETING 5-7PM                      CHDR - kidcare</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Meal</b> Mike's Fish/Tofu Corn-on-the-Cob Tomato/Artichoke Salad, Fruit Cook # 1 <b>Mike</b> Cook # 2 <b>Cameron</b> Clean # 1 <b>Nate+</b> Clean # 2 <b>Allison</b> Kidcare  <b>Meetings</b>	<b>Meal - NITE OUT</b> COOK OUT - dogs, beef/salmon burgers, fixin's, potluck w/ neighbors Cook # 1 <b>Kathy</b> Cook # 2 <b>Anne</b> Clean # 1 <b>Linda AY</b> Clean #2 <b>Bill &amp; Steve D</b> Kidcare  <b>Meetings</b> B'day: <b>JANET</b>	<b>Meal</b> Sesame chicken salad, (Veg alt.), Corn-on-the-cob or seas.veg, slice toms Cook # 1 <b>Clara</b> Cook #2 <b>Maura</b> Clean #1 <b>Matt+</b> Clean # 2 <b>Steve D</b> Kidcare  <b>Meetings:</b> Columbia City Farmers Market 3-7pm every Wed.	<b>Meal -NO</b> Cook # 1 Cook #2 Clean #1 Clean # 2 Kidcare:  <b>Meetings</b>	<b>Function</b>  Blue Angels and Hydroplanes invade the universe. Hydros 10-4pm Blue Angels and other air shows 12pm  <b>Beat Walk -                      Columbia City</b>	<b>Meal- brèkkie</b> Goat cheese/arti- choke Strata, saus. fruit, coffe, tea Cook #1 <b>Leah</b> Cook #2 <b>Marjean</b> Clean #1 <b>Larry</b> Clean # 2 <b>?</b>	<b>Meal-NO</b> Yoga w/ Elizabeth 9-10am - CHDR Cook #1 Cook #2 Clean # 1 Clean # 2

**Meal planning and meeting schedule**



**Communal dining ... al fresco!**



**Picnic and swimming**