

How Working Together Can Bring Us Together

Participatory Design As a Key to Sustainable Society

Kraus-Fitch Architects, Inc. was recognized by Natural Home & Garden magazine as one of the 'Top 10 Green Architect Firms in North America.' The firm specializes in sustainable design and cohousing, emphasizing a client-centered approach. Projects range from residential renovations to small commercial and institutional buildings.

Principal architects Mary Kraus and Laura Fitch have worked with over 20 cohousing communities across North America over the past fifteen years. Both have been long-time NESEA members. They live at Pioneer Valley Cohousing, the first cohousing neighborhood on the east coast, completed in 1994.

BY MARY KRAUS

If I were to tell you that our architectural firm specializes in sustainable design, you might imagine all kinds of energy-efficient buildings, intriguing green materials and innovative details and systems. What you might not suspect is the degree to which the design process itself can



also contribute to the making of a sustainable society.

The participatory process that we use with our cohousing clients is one that can be applied to a wide range of projects and efforts in the field of sustainable development.

Cohousing, a concept that originated in Denmark, consists of resident-developed neighborhoods which balance the privacy of the individual home with the richness of a shared community. Future residents participate in the design of their community, coming to consensus on general goals and specific requirements. While it takes time and commitment,



Photo: Gina Panzieri

Future cohousing residents use block exercise to explore site plan options.

this very process helps neighbors to build meaningful relationships even before they move in.

Picture twenty future neighbors gathered together in a room, making decisions about the community where they will live. Should the homes be laid out around a courtyard or a linear pedestrian way? Should they be attached in duplexes or fourplexes or both? Will anyone want to live in a center townhouse? Should there be a separate building for home offices? Do we prefer the common house to be visible as we enter the site, or would that other location by the edge of the woods better suit our goals? As you might imagine, some points of discussion are more contentious than others. This is where the strength of the participatory process comes in.

The Participatory Process

The focal point of the cohousing design process is the intensive participatory design workshop. In preparation for each work-

shop, we develop "homework" for the group members, in the form of an on-line survey. Part of this survey includes a draft of a design program customized to that group and reflecting basic principles that we have found to be successful for cohousing communities. From this starting point, each member edits according to what they think will benefit their particular group. The survey also includes a number of key questions, such as prioritizing spaces within the common house. Responses are collated and sent back to the group before the workshop, so that everyone can see the input of their fellow group members. We also use their feedback to create a second draft of the design program for review and consensus at the weekend workshop. Evaluating the range of responses to specific questions helps us hone in on an agenda that focuses the group's attention on issues that need to be discussed, rather than spending time on something that already has agreement.

During the weekend workshop, the group comes to consensus on a design program and schematic direction for their site layout, common house, or individual homes. Members discuss key issues with an emphasis on active listening. They participate in a visualization exercise in which each person imagines living in their community, then share the images that come up for them. Probably the most engaging aspects are the hands-on exercises. For the site plan, members work on a base plan using to-scale wooden models representing homes, the common house, and other structures on site. We break into several smaller groups, and each group explores different ways to lay out their community. Later, everyone participates in evaluating the designs relative to the program goals. Ultimately, the group sends the architectural team back to the office with one or more schematic layouts to refine.

How The Process Creates Community

The group works together to design their built community. In the process, they design their social community before they even move in. Working side by side in the block exercise, the group explores design ideas while connecting around shared dreams. When successfully facilitated, the consensus decision-making process helps future neighbors improve their skills in active listening, and consequently feel better understood by each other. It also supports and builds respect, and can encourage a greater feeling of safety and willingness to speak up. We encourage members to speak from the heart, expressing their thoughts in "I" statements rather than absolutes. This approach gives other people the space to hold a different opinion without feeling criticized. We encourage people to listen openly to what is being said, especially when they disagree, instead of formulat-

ing a response while the comment is still in progress. We strive to call more often on people who have spoken less so that all voices are equally heard. It is a process that requires individual responsibility and emotional maturity, and our cohousing clients are up for the challenge.

In working with cohousing over the past fifteen years, we are seeing an encouraging trend—groups are putting a greater emphasis on building constructive communication skills. One of my favorite examples comes from the Jamaica Plain Cohousing group. We were working with them on common house design and the subject of home offices was on the table. One member had her heart set on an office directly connected to the daily activities of the common house. Many of her future neighbors had strong security concerns. Offices open to the general public would then have direct access to their private buildings. So the woman with

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the "minority voice" stepped aside, understanding that her dream conflicted with her neighbors' needs. When the decision was made, other members stood up and gave her a hug, expressing their sorrow for what she had given up. She was very touched by this. Rather than saying "great, we got what we wanted," her neighbors focused instead on what she had lost. I see this as the power of a successful consensus process: the final decision may not be consistent with your personal preference, but you emerge with a feeling of mutual respect and caring.

A sustainable society certainly needs to include green buildings, land-conserving site development, and reduced transportation impacts. But these physical solutions only take us part way to a society that fully nurtures us. In order to really thrive, we need to learn how to interact with each other with respect and mutual support. If we can model these social patterns in our design processes, we can offer our clients a rich gift. And they in turn will touch the lives of those around them.

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