

Living Green in Cohousing: Choices for a Sustainable Planet

by Mary Kraus

In the last issue of the *Cohousing Journal*, we looked at opportunities for green design in cohousing. But the built environment is only half of the picture. How we live in our neighborhoods once they are built, the daily choices we make as individuals and as a community, will also have a great influence on our ecological impact. Part II of this article explores how we can live more sustainably once we move in.

Share Resources

In cohousing common amenities may be built in at the beginning, but taking full advantage of them is what permits cohousers to thrive in a lower-impact lifestyle. Sharing resources is a basic expectation. This begins with the common house, where common facilities become extensions of smaller, less resource-intensive homes. Baking your month's supply of homemade bread or doing your yearly canning in a well-

equipped community kitchen lets you keep things simple at home. I love going down to the common house to use the big mixer for my Christmas cookies, and feel no need to have such an appliance in my own house.

Likewise, each household that uses the common laundry rather than installing a machine in their home reduces waste—and liberates a little bit of space at home. Children playing in the kids' room don't need large rooms at home. Adults building shelves in the workshop can do without that extra in-house basement space. And 20 households showing up for a common dinner reduce energy use—human and fossil.

Sharing of resources also applies to garden shovels, shop tools, and large consumer items that single buyers can't afford. Realistically speaking, the smaller tools do tend to get misplaced, but it's still great to have them; it just takes some management to keep the systems working. Cohousers have been known to pool resources to buy canoes, trucks, and campers. Several neighbors at Pioneer Valley even bought an old red Porsche—how's that for frugal luxury? The gas mileage is actually quite good, although that was clearly not the initial motivation.

Borrow and Lend

Sharing isn't limited to large items or formal arrangements. Simple day-to-day borrowing and lending among neighbors is one of the pleasures and conveniences of living in cohousing, and reduces car use. If you need an egg, it's much simpler to borrow one from your neighbor than to hop in the car and go to the store—and next time you go shopping, you just might ask them if you can pick up anything. The one time a year you decide to bake a cheesecake, there's someone next door who will be glad to loan a spring-form pan—no point to let it collect dust in your cupboard.

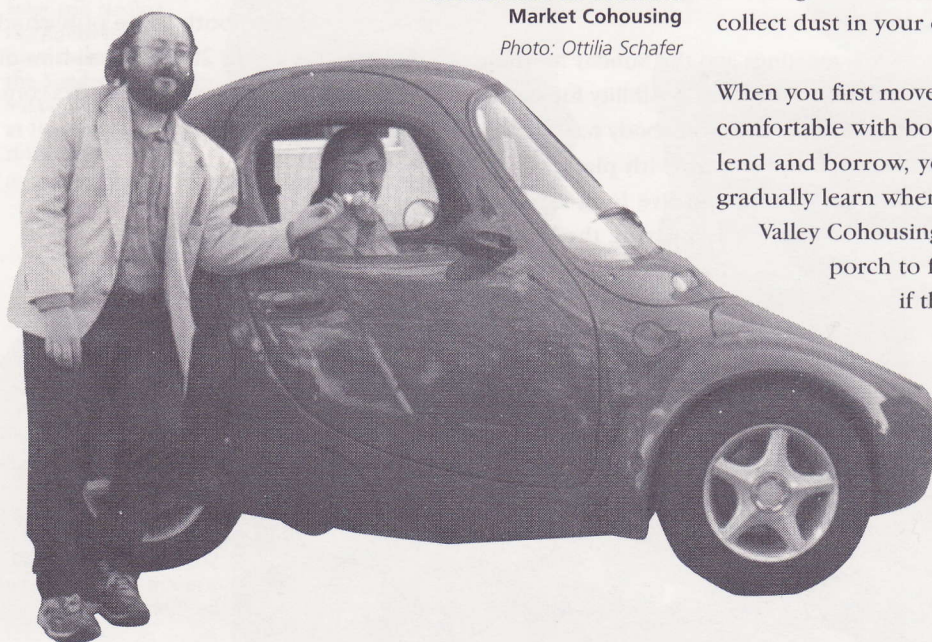
When you first move into cohousing, it can take a while to get comfortable with borrowing from your neighbors, but as you lend and borrow, you will be living more sustainably, and gradually learn where to look for each kind of item. At Pioneer

Valley Cohousing, everyone knows they can come to our porch to find a good bike pump, or to talk to Lyons if they need a belt sander. There's one secret

I've learned about borrowing: people actually like to lend things. They like to be helpful. It's a small connection that goes a long way toward creating that feeling of neighborhood we've dreamed of.

Neighbors Raines Cohen and Joani Blank share a Sparrow electric micro-car at Swan's Market Cohousing

Photo: Ottilia Schafer



Reduce Automobile Use

Living in cohousing offers many opportunities to reduce car usage. Borrowing ingredients instead of driving to the store is just the start. Local entertainment in the common house, such as a movie night, offers cohousing neighbors a fine evening without having to drive. Or we can take advantage of our wonderful performance space (otherwise known as the great room) and invite a local musician or comedy troupe. Nomad Cohousing in Boulder actually shares their common house with a theater group.

Organized carpools can be effective for adults working in the same location, or for kids attending the same camp or daycare. At Monterey Cohousing in Minneapolis, MN, three folk-dancing residents carpool to fit their schedules. As one of the dancers describes, "two go early, one leaves early, one goes later, and takes the other early bird home." Sometimes carpooling happens informally. Neighbors meet by chance in the parking lot and decide to head out together.

Cohousers can also reduce their car ownership by sharing or borrowing cars. My household got rid of one car when we moved into cohousing. We found that we used it rarely, and several neighbors were glad to lend us theirs on the occasions when we both need to drive. At Pleasant Hill, a shared vehicle serves as the second car for two households. Two residents at Swan's Market belong to "City Car Share," sharing a small 3-wheel electric vehicle.

Support Local Agriculture and Bulk-Buying

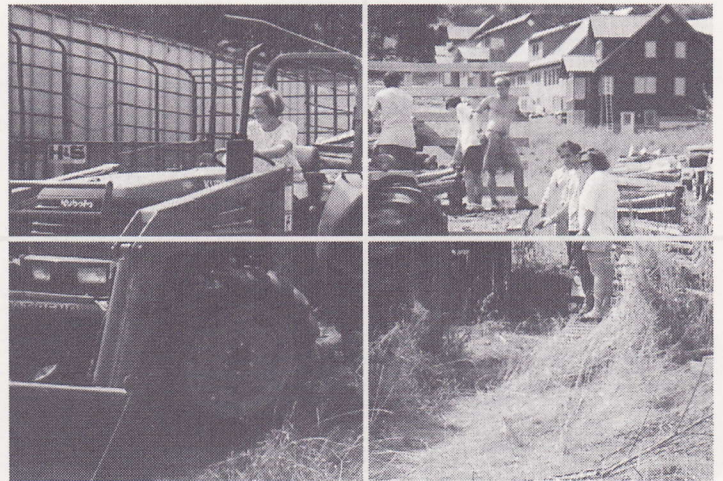
Cohousing communities are uniquely positioned to support local farms. A large rural or suburban site might have enough fertile open space to lease to a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farmer. These farms work by subscription: each member pays the farmer at the

beginning of the season, and picks up their share of organic produce each week. A CSA will not only supply the cohousing group, but will create a valuable source of local, organic food for neighbors in the larger community as well. EcoVillage at Ithaca and Cobb Hill Cohousing both have such farms on their sites. Cambridge Cohousing, an urban community in Massachusetts, supports a CSA financially and serves as a drop-off site. Subscribers to the farm include not only a number of cohousing members, but 60 households from the urban neighborhood at large.

Local growers may also be supported through a buying club or a cooperative association. Every four weeks at Pioneer Valley Cohousing, the Northeast Cooperatives truck pulls up to our common house.

We unload and distribute cases of (mostly) healthful, organic food and supplies, bought at wholesale prices. About two-thirds of our households are members of the club, which supplies the basics for our common house meals as well. This one delivery saves many individual car trips to the supermarket. Plus, the quantities of food some of us have on hand make it easier for neighbors to borrow rather than run to the store. Another important advantage of the food club is the lowered cost of organic food, making it accessible to more households.

Families can share farm purchasing on a smaller scale. In the basement of our common house we have a refrigerator stocked with milk from a farm two miles away. One of my neighbors set up an



Cobb Hill Cohousing residents in Hartland VT support a CSA farm on their property—and even lend a hand.

Photo: John Fabel



arrangement with the farmer, and he delivers milk in glass bottles twice a week. If you want to sign up for milk, you just drop off a check and keep track of your purchases. No need to ever travel to the store to get milk—just head down to the common house. We are also lucky enough to have an organic beef farm a couple of towns away. Several households team together periodically and order a side of beef, which arrives cut to our specifications. We stock it away in our freezers—some of us borrow a shelf in a neighbor's freezer—and have a steady supply of organic, grass-fed beef for months to come. If I lived in a single-family home, it would be much harder to organize such a thing—and I might have to buy an entire freezer just for myself, with all the associated energy use.

Robyn Williams of Pinakarri Community in Fremantle, Australia describes a

delightful local-food arrangement: "Late every Friday afternoon Werner arrives from his organic farm, with freshly picked fruit and vegetables and some bio-dynamic food items (tofu, rice, milk) as well as honey and homemade jams.

He sets up in our car park and rings the bell. Community members mingle with other neighbours in the sunset."

Reuse Second-Hand Items

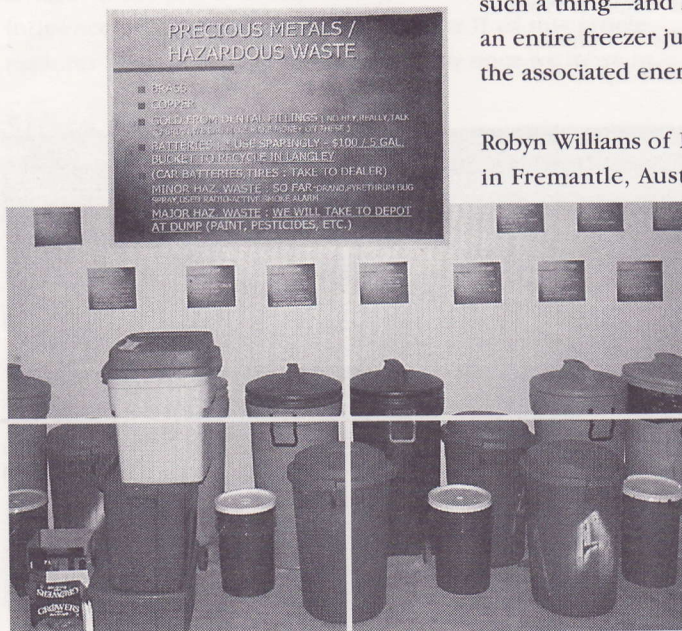
We all have items we want to get rid of, and things we want or need that we would prefer to get second-hand rather than pay "new price." Ecologically speaking, it's far better for discarded items to find a new use than end up in the landfill, and reusing reduces the demand to manufacture new ones. How convenient, then, to have neighbors

who may want just the thing you discarded or may have just the thing you need! Clothing, for instance. Particularly children's clothing, which is outgrown fast and furious. Some cohousing communities take advantage of this opportunity for re-use by setting up a clothing exchange in their common house basement. Even if you don't do this formally, you can keep an eye out for which kids are likely candidates for your kids' outgrown clothes, and notice who might be about to cast off the size that you need.

At Pioneer Valley, we have an area called the "Take it or Leave it," named after a similar service at the local dump. It is fun to guess which items came from which household, and to see your old sweater show up on a friend's back. I once scored a pair of black jeans that a neighbor had found there (pre-shortened to just my length) then decided she didn't want them after all and returned. One of my friends here tells me that until her first son was seven years old, she hadn't had to buy one stitch of clothing for him, except a pair of shoes. Takoma Village has a "swap table" where items are left. Popular features include paperback mystery novels which circulate widely and reappear repeatedly until they are completely worn out. Pleasant Hill Cohousing holds a yearly "stuff exchange" in addition to having a free box at the common house for clothes, books and other items.

Organize More Effective Recycling

Some communities take the initiative to recycle more than just the basic paper and containers. Quayside Village Cohousing in North Vancouver, BC made a commitment early on to strive for 90% recycling. One resident has taken an active role in this endeavor, offering workshops to neighbors to help them set up the process in their homes.



At Quayside Village Cohousing, materials are sorted meticulously in the common house recycling room.

Photo: Courtesy Quayside Village Cohousing



Northeast Farmers Cooperative drop-off at Pioneer Valley Cohousing

Photo: John Fabel

Bins are available for all kinds of materials: wood & corks, low grade paper (food paper), hard plastics, plastic bags, precious metals (copper, brass, etc.), aluminum, paint cans & pesticide containers, oil containers, unscented candle wax, pizza boxes and three types of styrofoam—not to mention a bin for deposit bottles and Salvation Army items. As resident Linda Moore explains: “The bins are in the parkade in one of the parking stalls that doesn’t have a car. In our municipality you have to have 1.2 parking spots per unit—of course we don’t have that many cars. So, we’re glad to use one for recycling, one for bikes, one for our grey-water system!”

Many, if not most communities also reduce their trash by composting. Manzanita Village is ordering an electric utility vehicle with a small truck bed, which they plan to use for pickup of compost, recycling and trash. It is expected that older kids in the community might take on this job. Greyrock Commons has a set of large composting bins that they use on their community farm.

Design to Support Sustainable Living

Finally, remember that the way you design your community can support your intention to live sustainably. For instance, include convenient facilities for recycling and composting. Include a location in individual kitchens or mudrooms for bins. In the common house, provide facilities for containers and paper in the kitchen, and for paper recycling in the mailroom. Support people who are trying to minimize their car usage by including convenient and secure accommodations for bikes. And centralize your parking to allow for spontaneous carpooling when two of you show up at the lot at the same time.

Conclusion

One of the most satisfying aspects of sustainable living is that one opportunity introduces another. I mentioned that

cohousing has allowed my household to get by with owning one car. Well, we thought about it the other day, and we realized that over the years, thanks to the generosity of our car-lending neighbors, we have saved enough money to install solar electric panels on our roof! Who says the average person can’t afford photovoltaics?

As you embark on your green adventures, I hope you will create equally satisfying stories to tell. Just use your imagination, be sure to look carefully at your particular opportunities, make choices that are appropriate for your group, and keep building on your successes as your community evolves. ♦

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Pioneer Valley cohouser Zane Reid can borrow eggs from his grandmother, Rebecca Reid, any time. She lives two doors down.

Photo: Mary Kraus