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Co-housing. It's a thing. A good trend that developers should know about. - by Thomas House

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Thomas House,
THA Architect

We noted in our last article that baby boomers (not again?) are driving the trend toward rentals, and after decades building up suburban culture, are choosing to live closer to town and city.

So, as usual, driving trends such as co-housing.

So what is it?

At its most basic, co-housing is a community of private homes clustered around a shared space. But details vary.

(It is also an opportunity. We'll get to that.)

Sometimes they are indeed individual private houses with traditional amenities - plus a shared commons, including a commons house with extended amenities - a larger kitchen, larger dining (and hosting) facility, laundry, and recreational facilities.

But as often as not, they may look more like a cluster of condominium units comprised largely of private living area, with a central commons area featuring the kitchen, dining areas, laundry, recreation, etc. This variant is more urban in character - and more collective.

But though there are shared responsibilities, these are not communes.

These are private, deeded homes with private owners, with private incomes, and private lives; they just happen to be clustered around shared space and amenities. For the communities with separate, private structures, there is also something already familiar to condo owners: A homeowners association.

Homeowners belong to - and usually manage - this association, and are expected to shoulder some of the burdens. Yes, chores; after which, you can go home and do whatever.

Community by design (and build)

Here's the opportunity part: Each co-housing community has a mission. Even if loosely defined, that mission is wrapped around a larger core of features. And one of those features is design.

Like standard density housing, individual units of complementary design must be developed on a site with dedicated common space, though the density is relatively low by comparison. The design is specific to the objectives of the community. Along with site and landscape considerations, these present rewarding potential for designers, architects and developers.

Currently, it is typical to create such a project in an area with available acreage, but condo-like urban communities are gaining traction, providing juicy challenges for interior designers.

These projects can be initiated by developers on an 'if you build it, they will come' ethos. And they can be developed in partnership with specific institutions, such as a university, college, or large religious institution which will have a mission-ready population to market to.

Not a particularly new idea

The current movement began in Denmark, among families who felt their disjointed neighborhoods did not meet their needs, and were looking for a higher quotient of 'community.'

In the U.S., an earlier form was the co-operative apartment, which has become a regular feature in the 1920s. The first modern co-housing project of the type we're discussing here is thought to be Muir Commons, completed in 1991.

One of the key advantages of co-housing is reduced cost, achieved both by the typically smaller scale of the project, its neighborly density, and pooling resources to share a facility dedicated to expensive amenities.

This lower cost makes a community particularly ideal for families (the shared space in these clusters will no doubt involve a playground) as well as for those boomers we mentioned earlier, empty nesters who suddenly discover the nest is a little too empty.

Social immediate

In a fragmented society, we might add, this could be just the ticket - a way to get people to see facetime in the real sense, not the smartphone version.

Communities exist with a cross-section of mission profiles. The cohousing.org directory lists communities with missions geared to families, multigenerational, post-family couples, racial diversity, aging in place, environmental sustainability - the options seem limited only by creativity.

They are located in rural, ex-urban, suburban, and urban areas. In Massachusetts, the New England state with the most traction, communities have formed in geographically-diverse locations such as Colrain, Northampton, Berlin, Cambridge, West Tisbury, and Malden. Six are currently listed as "forming."

Vermont, too, has a healthy number - per capita, higher than Mass. The fertile, unplanted fields of opportunity are New Hampshire and Maine, each with only two. These seem like ideal places to establish such communities.

So build it. They will come.

Tom House is a principal at THA Architects, Stratham, N.H.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540