



Cohousing Handbook

www.agencycohcom.org

Introduction

Have you ever thought that it would be great for you and some friends to get together and build or buy somewhere for you all to live in your later years? If you have, this handbook is for you!

Most people want to stay in their homes as they get older but those homes can be unwieldy to manage, tie up substantial real estate and lead to isolation and loneliness over time. But there are limited alternatives for independent living. Retirement villages are great for some but they nibble away at independent living and are not always a great financial choice. Nursing homes are generally not a choice that people make, but one that circumstances dictate.

As people live longer and age better, perspectives are shifting and we need to demand something better in housing options.

And yet...

A better housing option already exists. It's a style of collaborative independent living called **cohousing**. Widely known in parts of Europe and the United States, it is relatively new to Australia. But its time is coming. And it's a style of living that doesn't mean having to wait until you get older to take advantage of it.

Agency Cohousing and Community was set up to advocate for this kind of housing in Balmain and inner urban Sydney and to work to create this kind of housing arrangement for ourselves, with our primary focus being on creating developments in which residents (in most cases) will be able to stay for the rest of their lives.

This handbook gives an overview of the Cohousing model that we have in mind and how we propose to set about making it happen.

Cohousing

Central to Agency Cohousing is the concept of cohousing – an approach to living that is focused on community. Cohousing developments are about sharing more living spaces and reducing social isolation. They are designed to offer residents privacy, security and community through a mixture of private residences and shared spaces that facilitate social interaction.

This is a style of living that has developed a strong tradition since the 1960's in The Netherlands, Scandinavia and the United States as well as, more recently, in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. It has just begun to gain traction in Australia and we believe it is destined to become a new part of our housing mix.

What people commit to sharing will vary from group to group, depending on their interests and values. But all will generally include a shared garden, a communal kitchen and dining space, where residents come together for regular shared meals. Some will include shared laundry facilities and shared vehicles. Both these save space and cost and contribute towards a lighter environmental footprint. Others may include shared guest facilities, obviating the need for seldom-used 'spare rooms' in private dwellings.

What people do not commit to in cohousing is the sharing of personal income or any kind of shared economy.

The Cohousing concept works for people of all ages and stages. It can suit families with young children where shared meals, play facilities and care can make a big difference to the quality of life for parents and children. It can suit groups of people who want to focus on sustainable living, lightening their footprint on the planet. It can suit those who are determined to live their lives in a way that means they remain relevant and engaged for the whole of their lives. With shared principles agreed upon, it can work for any like-minded group of people.

Residents manage cohousing developments themselves and often get involved in the design process to ensure that the type and mix of private and shared space meets their collective needs and vision.

For further information on Cohousing see:

- *Creating Cohousing: Building Sustainable Communities, Charles Durrett & Kathryn McCamant:*
- *The Senior Cohousing Handbook, Charles Durrett*
www.collaborativehousing.org.au

Our Cohousing focus

The Agency Cohousing and Community focus is on:

- **environmentally sensitive development(s) designed to support a healthy, connected quality of life** for people as they grow older. Developments may well be inter-generational but they will be planned for longevity, so that most will not need to move into another form of housing during their lifetime*
- **development - or re-development - sites in the Balmain / Inner West areas of Sydney initially** - as many of our members are or will be located in this area – with a widening of our lens to include “middle ring” suburbs where there may be additional opportunities
- **a membership base of people who want to stay in Sydney**, who are interested in this collaborative form of living arrangement that prioritises lifetime residence, environmental sensitivity and a commitment to being “a very good neighbour”.

How big?

Sizes of developments will be determined by the size of the land and the rules associated with developing it. In an inner-urban setting, developments will most likely need to be more than one storey – we envisage 2 or 3

Evidence from around the world suggests that around 15 to 30 dwellings in cohousing are optimal – so larger sites will be broken down into smaller entities



* unless those who need full time care cannot be supported or managed 'in-house'

What about Design?

Each development will have its own unique footprint, but we will aim for:

Common spaces that facilitate community interaction –

places for people to connect with each other in their everyday movements and others where people can spend leisure time with each other



A high level of environmental sustainability and energy efficiency
in both the design and operation of the community

A diversity of dwelling sizes Accessibility and inclusivity
– dwellings that can be adapted to accommodate assisted living as needed

A strong connection to the outdoors
with access to a shared garden – roof-top and/or ground level

Light airy spaces
with high ceilings and a pleasant outlook

Good acoustic design
within and between units and common spaces

And the shared spaces?

To be true to the aim of cohousing to facilitate resident interaction, development(s) will include:

- Common kitchen and dining/living space
- Ground floor and/or rooftop garden
- Wider walkways or other spaces that facilitate incidental interactions

Other possibilities?

An inner urban location for developments may mean that some commercial space is a requirement

– and could be beneficial, bringing in income for the community. Other types of communal space can be discussed at the design stage and decided upon depending on group interests and skills, availability of space, affordability etc.

They could include:

- Guest and/or carer suites (to replace seldom used 'spare' rooms)
- Gym/exercise/yoga space
- Consulting rooms for allied health
- Storage space
- Library/arts space/studio/workshop
- Café
- Repair outlet
- Co-op outlet



Who will Develop?

Where possible, the resident group will 'develop' the projects themselves but it is likely that there will be a partnership on developments for land and building finance. Our intention is to negotiate with organisations with a sustainable focus and with models that include built in savings and capped profits.



Affordability?

Our aim is to make dwellings (of all sizes) in each development affordable by either being our own developer or by securing financially sustainable partnerships that would take out many "middleman" costs, reduce many operational costs and cap profits at a lower percentage than the current market norm.

However, inner-urban land and/or buildings are at a premium and agreed communal facilities will add to base costs.

The 'bottom line' is that the projected cost of each dwelling will depend on the land, its location, current ownership and the rules associated with developing or redeveloping it, the projected number of dwellings in a new development and the agreed type and number of shared facilities.

So these will be determined on a case by case basis.

What makes it right for me – *and me for it?*

While specific management plans for each development will be developed by an agreed-upon Leadership Group, all will encompass certain foundational principles that the people who live there will share.

Those principles are, in essence, about creating and being an integral part of a community that:

- is socially, environmentally and financially sustainable
- is for residents' life-time residence (where they choose this)
- discourages speculation
- promotes interaction and togetherness while respecting privacy
- supports people to live and age in a healthy, dignified manner
- supports diversity of race, religion, gender, lifestyle and ability
- has a consultative and transparent decision-making process

How will it be managed?

Management of each Community will be by its residents – with the initial management plan developed by the agreed Leadership Group.

Included in the Management Plan would be rules that would encompass such things as:

- dispute resolution
- pet keeping policy
- site management and administration
- community contribution
- shared space procedures

Yes, but what *kind* of management?



We're talking about self-governing management here – most probably a version of **sociocracy** – where every person gets heard, not just those with the strongest views or the loudest voices.

Sociocracy is a governance model based on the insistence that everyone has the opportunity **to be heard** and that processes are **transparent**.

When all residents' needs and concerns are heard and considered and decisions are made in a way that is truly collaborative, there will be high 'buy-in' and acceptance from all.

Broadly, meetings are held in a **circle**, to represent that all have a valid contribution to make. And all sociocratic circles have an appointed **facilitator**, whose job it is to maintain the integrity of the process. The group hears each other in **rounds**, and gives each other the opportunity to question, clarify and object to a proposal.

The group reaches 'consent' around ideas that support the agreed overall vision, rather than individual preference. It welcomes creative and constructive input as opportunities to refine a suggestion and add ideas that otherwise may not have emerged.

The group uses **predictable, respectful** ways to navigate difficult issues and seeks solutions that are '**Good Enough for Now**' and '**Safe Enough Try**'

Wider Community Connection?

While communities will be set up to promote incidental and deliberate social interaction, we recognise the importance of setting up and maintaining wider community engagement.

To complement the cohousing arm, our **Agency Community Hub** is already a vibrant, practical supportive network of people who live in the inner west and who want to stay socially connected (and assisted as needed) as they grow older. It is now run through **Meetup**, where a plethora of activities are organised and communicated to an ever-growing list of locals.

We expect that future cohousing developments will have many areas of crossover with Hub members. See our website for more details.

Want to be part of the Action?

If you are interested in the prospect of being part of a cohousing development in the Balmain/Inner West and perhaps other inner-urban areas, you can keep in touch with what's happening by becoming an Ordinary Member of Agency Cohousing and Community for just \$25 a year. You'll receive email notices about events, workshops and prospective developments.

Simply email us at: agencycohcom@gmail.com requesting details for taking out an ordinary membership.