



'IT SEEMS AN OBVIOUS HUMAN WAY TO LIVE ... SOME OF THE BEST THINGS ABOUT LIVING HERE ARE BEING PART OF A COMMUNITY AND LIVING NEAR FRIENDS. HAVING REALLY GOOD MEALS COOKED FOUR TIMES A WEEK IS A BONUS'

GETTING CLOSER

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TO A GREATER THAN EVER DEGREE, PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR A MORE FULFILLING EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY. BUT FOR MOST, JOINING A FULLY-FLEDGED COMMUNE IS A STEP TOO FAR. WHAT IF THERE WAS AN OPTION OFFERING THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS?

More than four decades ago, a Danish man called Jan Gudmand-Hoyer had a vision. He was an architect who dreamed of creating a place where people of all ages and backgrounds could live together and build a community while retaining a sense of individuality and privacy. What emerged was the concept of *bofællesskab*, roughly translated as 'living together'. This was later dubbed 'co-housing' by American architects Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett in their book *Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves*, published in 1989.

Co-housing has been described as a way of compensating for the isolating effects of modern society, where neighbours don't know each other and everyday collaboration is minimal. Gudmand-Hoyer first outlined his ideas in 1968 in an article in a Danish national newspaper entitled 'The Missing Link Between Utopia and the Dated One-Family House'. More than a hundred families interested in living in co-housing came forward as a result. Countless co-housing communities now thrive across the world with the largest concentrations, not counting Denmark, in the UK and the US.

The members of each community create their own version of co-housing, but there are some universal characteristics. The opportunity to eat together a few times a week is a key feature, and each adult is expected to contribute by taking turns to cook. 'Eating together is fundamental to the functioning of our community – this is where we catch up and discuss our lives,' says Kirsten Moeller, resident for 30 years at Bondebjerget in Denmark.

David Michael, one of the founders of Springhill Cohousing near Stroud in the UK, was first attracted to this way of living when he volunteered on a kibbutz more than 30 years ago. 'It seems an obvious human way to live,' he said. 'Some of the best things about living here are being part of a community and living near friends.

Having really good meals cooked four times a week is also a bonus.'

Communities are usually pedestrianised and, where possible, the physical layout encourages a sense of community with houses clustered around, and offering a view of, the common house. Building methods tend towards sustainability. There is no ideology imposed – apart from a commitment to living in a shared community of this kind – and decision-making is reached by consensus with no hierarchical structures. Voting is considered a last resort.

THIS WAY OF RUNNING THINGS IS NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES. KIRSTEN SAID: 'Having lived in this community for 30 years, I have of course experienced many changes. I admit I have been frustrated with what has, on occasion, been a low level of participation in the decision-making process. But to an extent this reflects how society overall has developed, with a much bigger focus on individuality. Fighting through these challenges and being part of defending what is close to our hearts has been hugely rewarding.'

David has had a similar experience, working through frustrations with his neighbours to reach a place of synergy. He says: 'The most difficult part is too many meetings, and having to consult on making changes such as putting steps into the garden.' But for him, this is clearly a sacrifice worth making – he is currently instrumental in the setting up of another co-housing community.

The project will be the fourth of this kind for David, with Springhill as the pilot and the first new-build co-housing scheme in the UK. It has 34 units ranging from one-bedroom flats to five-bedroom houses, with a three-storey common house. In 2005, John Prescott, the then deputy Prime Minister, gave his Award for Sustainable Communities to Springhill, saying: 'The pedestrianised "main street" meanders around the site, creating a characterful village feel'. Boasting well-insulated buildings, many with photovoltaic panels on their roofs, Springhill also received the 2006 Eurosolar Award for inspiring renewable-energy projects.

Typically in co-housing, facilities such as a laundry room, play areas, communal gardens and even guest rooms are shared, and social activities – film nights, speakers, yoga classes and even beer-tasting and brewing – can be in hosted common houses. Days out, such as mushroom forays, fishing and sports days spice things up.

THE BEAUTY FOR MANY WHO CHOOSE THIS WAY OF LIFE IS THE BALANCE IT IS possible to strike between family and community. For children, secure play areas mean more freedom to roam around, and adults

look out for each other's children. For the older generation, co-housing provides a network of companionship and mutual support. And if you don't want to interact, the privacy of your own self-contained house is just a few steps away.

In the time since Gudmand-Hoyer first shared his concept with the world, much has changed. Interestingly, while the changes have been varied, many new schemes tend to have smaller individual residences with an increase in shared facilities, both in terms of area and regularity of activities. The indications are that the emergent enthusiasm for living even closer together reflects a growing confidence in co-housing as a concept.

In the UK there are ten fully-fledged co-housing communities, with another 15 to 20 operating to some extent. The great majority of these are membership-owned. Denmark has at least 40 fully functioning communities, and as many as one per cent of the population is believed to have chosen this form of living.

And it seems that, once they've settled in, people are reluctant to leave. Turnover in co-housing is small compared to conventional housing. At Springhill over the last six years, only three new families have arrived, with numbers slightly higher at Bondebjerget.

Kirsten reflected: 'We have a number of second-generation families living here, which can only be a testament to it being a good place to grow up.' ■

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