Co-housing is a model for communal living that aims to foster hyper-local interpersonal networks through shared space and collaborative decision-making. While the housing itself is separated into individual units, co-housing communities are built around shared spaces. Co-housing is a “relationships-first” housing approach; it is designed to strengthen neighborly connection in the face of a housing system that often serves to undermine such networks. While co-housing is not explicitly an affordable housing model, its principles could be applied to foster local sense-of-place and long-term stability as an anti-displacement measure.

**HOW CO-HOUSING WORKS**

Co-housing communities are created by groups of people with a shared interest in living communally; this group is typically established before the community is physically built. Co-housing may be designed around a specific type of community or set of shared principles, such as multigenerational or senior living.

From home size to common spaces to architectural features, co-housing communities are designed in away that fosters interpersonal relationships. Shared spaces include a “Common House” with a kitchen and dining area, and green spaces that can include playgrounds and gardens. These shared spaces can also be used as gathering points for the greater community.

Each resident or residential group owns their own home in the co-housing community. Communities range in shape and size, but most incorporate 20-40 individual housing units.

Co-housing communities are usually planned, owned, and managed by the residents themselves, using collective decision-making to maintain shared property.

**MAKING CO-HOUSING AFFORDABLE**

Many co-housing principles are aligned with anti-displacement efforts, including cooperative ownership and building self-governance capacity. Most co-housing communities, however, do not explicitly incorporate affordability measures to ensure that low-wealth individuals can access the benefits of this communal model.

The Partnership for Affordable Co-Housing (PFAC), a nonprofit based out of Colorado, works to build relationships between co-housing communities and affordable housing advocates to promote mixed-income co-housing communities. Through this partnership, PFAC helps establish co-housing units wherein residents pay no more than 30-50% of their income towards housing and utilities. PFAC also provides technical assistance to co-housing groups that are committed to ensuring affordable housing in their communities.

While co-housing can be cost-prohibitive, there are aspects of community design that lower cost of living for co-housing residents. Cost savings could come through shared labor like community childcare or exchanging household necessities and other goods.
CONSIDERATIONS

Spotlight on: Troy Gardens (Madison, WI)

Troy Gardens is the only co-housing project in the United States developed by a community land trust. Through collaboration between the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and the Madison Area Community Land Trust, Troy Gardens contains 30 housing units with 20 reserved for low to moderate income residents. The 31-acre project also features community gardens, a working farm, and restored prairie land.

Troy Gardens operates in partnership with Community Groundworks, formerly known as The Friends of Troy Gardens. Community Groundworks works to connect people to Troy Gardens’ natural assets through education, urban farming, and stewardship programs. These programs are accessible both to Troy Gardens residents as well as those living off-site. In doing so, the property integrates an unusually wide variety of land uses.

Class and Accessibility

Co-housing costs about the same as a home purchase on the traditional housing market. It is also primarily employed as an ownership (not rental) model, necessitating access to loans or upfront capital. These communities have significant class barriers and tend to be largely made up of white people and those with economic means.

Land and Location

Because co-housing is designed and built from scratch, it requires finding space where these new communities can set up shop. This means that co-housing is often located in ex-urban or rural environments, far from resources, jobs, transit, and community networks.

Long Term Planning

Co-housing communities take a long time to put into action. Between identifying a good group to partner with, working with architects and designers, and actually building, these communities can take years to actualize. Those in more precarious living situations may not be able to afford such a long process.

GREENING THROUGH A SHARING ECONOMY

Co-housing is built on sharing, both in terms of space and material goods. Between energy usage, carpooling, and food-sharing, being in intentional relationship with neighbors means that co-housing residents can more efficiently distribute resources among the whole. In this way, environmental sustainability is naturally aligned with the principles of communal living.