Benefits of modern cohousing

As development in Aotearoa's cities intensifies, so too does the need to encourage diverse building and living solutions. While cohousing remains a relatively niche housing model in Aotearoa, what could it look like if it was the norm?

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Artist's render of Dunedin's Toiora cohousing development.

THE PACE of urban intensification is obvious in the changing face of the landscapes of every major metropolis from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland to Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington to Ōtautahi Christchurch. Take any major arterial route from the central city to the suburbs, and it's clear to see the increasing number of medium and high-density buildings popping up on what were previously quarter-acre sections.

Time to look at housing alternatives

As we make the move to live in smaller spaces, it's also time to reflect on the value of alternative models, such as cohousing.

The popularity of cohousing is slowly on the rise in Aotearoa, but it's still a relatively new idea. While residents recently moved into Toiora in Dunedin and Cohaus in Auckland, the number of cohousing communities that have completed construction is few and far between.

The research I've undertaken with *Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities* shows that these discrete developments remain the exception rather than the norm, yet there is a lot we can learn from cohousing communities about how to successfully intensify our urban centres. Yes, it's about developing the right buildings, but mostly, it's about designing for the people.

Benefits of cohousing

The social benefits of cohousing are well documented. Residents retain independence with their own self-sufficient units but gain the benefits of collective capital through shared and communal facilities. Most importantly, residents have easy access to build social connections with others in the community. The way the environment is built helps facilitate these interactions.

These communities are designed to be people-focused, with cars pushed to the edges of the site. This creates open spaces between homes for residents to meet, play, garden or just bump in to one another.

An alternative model

Socially and architecturally, cohousing is an alternative model. On affordability, though, cohousing has not yet shown its potential. Owner-occupied units are the norm, and individual owners accrue capital gains.

Interestingly, the research shows a few communities have challenged this - Ibsgården, a community in Roskilde, Denmark, uses a formula to determine the sale price of units. That way, it is up to the residents who remain in the community who they choose to sell to, and it makes no difference to the seller. An ageing community can prioritise selling an available unit to a young family to bring more diversity to the group, for instance.

What could modern cohousing look like?

Neighbourhoods could look quite different if cohousing were the norm rather than the exception.

Affordable

Cohousing could combine its social benefits with other models of financing to open the door to a more diverse range of residents and genuinely become an alternative, affordable housing option. While many groups aim to build and sell at cost price at the start, often there are no mechanisms built in for the retention of affordability on an ongoing basis.

Other initiatives such as applying a cooperative model to cohousing could help. In this case, the cooperative retains shared ownership of the land and housing, and residents buy shares in the cooperative in return for the right to occupy a unit. Residents then pay rent to cover the construction and ongoing maintenance costs, and that rent reduces over time as the level of debt reduces.

It's insightful to note that government support through no or low-interest loans was a key success factor for Denmark's surge in cohousing under a cooperative model in the 1980s and 1990s.

Diverse

More affordability brings greater diversity. Most cohousing units in New Zealand are owner-occupied and, as a result, are generally only accessible to the middle class. Similarly, Danish cohousing groups often share aspirations for being diverse but find that those who are interested and can afford to buy in are all very alike.

While at face value, there may be more diversity in New Zealand cohousing groups, the financial hurdles inevitably exclude certain groups of people.

Sustainable

Our research also showed that cohousing has a light footprint on the land. Most cohousing developments are medium density, sporting terraced houses and sometimes apartments.

We compared New Zealand and Danish cohousing developments with neighbouring areas of conventional, low-density housing. Given the densities, it made sense that the cohousing areas were supporting almost twice the number of homes as their low-density neighbours. Interestingly, though, the footprints on the land were almost identical.

Through clever and compact design, cohousing can house more people while retaining similar proportions of green space, built form and paved areas as low-density housing.

A future norm?

Our existing financial and legislative frameworks need updating to better facilitate collective housing models like cohousing. At the same time, the potential exists to advance our own uniquely Aotearoa model of cohousing to become a normal and affordable housing option for all.

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