



## Creating Community, one Neighbourhood at a Time



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## A Tour is Worth a Thousand (or More) Words

by Joani Blank, Swan's Market Cohousing

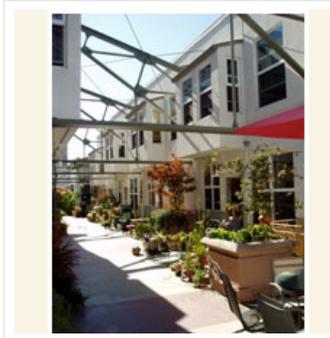
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*Doyle Street (Emeryville, CA) resident Barry Harris talks about the site. (Photo by Evangeline Welch)*

Many years ago while living at Doyle Street Cohousing in Emeryville, CA, I casually mentioned to a visiting tour group that I planned to offer my unit for sale within eight or nine months because I would be moving to Swan's Market Cohousing in Oakland upon its completion. The next day, a woman who'd flown up from Los Angeles to attend the tour called me up and offered to buy my unit for about \$20,000 more than I was thinking about listing it for. She's happily living there still.

Several years ago, a group of eight tired but happy participants of a tour I had just led in Northern California sat together in Swan's common house while my co-leader and I were tidying up the meeting room. Without any encouragement from us, the tour participants spontaneously formed a new core group. A few weeks later they combined forces with a few members of an inactive group in the area. Around that same time, some short-term renters here at Swan's invited a friend over for an afternoon visit. Later that evening they all shared a common meal with Swan's residents in the common house. The friend hadn't heard of cohousing before her visit that day, but a few weeks later she traveled to Arizona and decided to purchase a unit in a cohousing community there.



*The interior walkway at Swan's Market Cohousing in Oakland, CA, is totally invisible from the street, but tour participants get a peek. (Photo by Jeff Pyle)*

### Words don't hold a candle to the real thing

Those involved in cohousing know the difficulty of describing what cohousing is to those who are unfamiliar with it. We're usually busily explaining what cohousing is not. No, cohousing communities are not "new millennium communes." No, we are probably not what you imagine when you hear the phrase "intentional community." No, we do not screen out people who do not share our religious, political or social ideology. No, we don't all live in a shared house. No, we don't share all our meals in a community dining room. No, we're not really like a kibbutz. And on and on. Sure, we'd rather be positive, telling folks how it really is to live in cohousing. If we're lucky we get to explain that unlike some other kinds of collaborative housing, each household in cohousing has a complete residence with its own real kitchen. We tell others that we're heavily involved in planning for the place where we will be living so that it meets our needs and desires. We explain that we self-manage and mostly self-maintain our communities. We talk about how we use consensus as a process to make decisions and nurture our sense of community. And we emphasize that those who want a lot of privacy can have it in cohousing. Those of us who already live in cohousing communities will tell you, however, that these explanations don't hold a candle to the impact of showing friends, relatives and other visitors around our communities. And folks who have visited a friend living in cohousing (especially if they've shared in a common meal) or those who have attended one of the day-long cohousing tours that visit between five and seven communities, universally come away with a good sense of how things really are where we live.

### Tours often attract likely buyers

As the tours coordinator for the Cohousing Association of the United States (Coho/US) for several years, I planned and led or co-lead over a dozen cohousing tours in California, Colorado, the Seattle Area and Massachusetts.

Most people who participate in these tours are folks who are curious about living in cohousing communities and want to learn more about them. The tours also usually attract a few people who



*The tour provides the opportunity to compare community elements such as common houses, including the new interior lighting and paint at Swan's Market Cohousing in Oakland, C.A. (Photo by Jeff Pyle)*

are already members of a forming group or a community being developed, a couple of professionals (developers, planners, builders or architects) who are considering working with a cohousing group, plus a graduate student or two. Some of the participants who are considering living in cohousing are looking far ahead because they

*David Dobkin shows a recent tour group around Berkeley Cohousing. (Photo by Evangeline Welch)*



*Pleasant Hill Cohousing's newly built units and fresh landscaping warrant a photo stop by tour participants. (Photo by Evangeline Welch)*

don't expect to afford to become homeowners in the near future. Many others, however, say they've been looking for something "just like this" for years, and several report that they would be willing to sell their current residence and move into cohousing "right away" if a unit of the right size and price were to become available in one of the communities on the tour.

### Mini-workshops on the bus prepare visitors for site visits

The Association's bus tours always start with one of the longer drives (1-2 hours). During this time the leader gives participants a chance to introduce themselves, shares some general information about cohousing, answers questions, raises topics for participants to discuss with their seatmates and prepares them for observations they will want to make during the 45-minute visit to each community.



*Tour participants explore the connected backyards and patio behind the Common House of N Street Cohousing, the archetypal organic/retrofit community in Davis, C.A. (Photo by Evangeline Welch)*

We also distribute a fact sheet and site plan before arriving at each site. We encourage participants to pay attention to the different physical aspects of the community -- site layout, orientation of private houses to the common house, parking placement, building characteristics, gardens and open space -- and look for what works well (and what doesn't). We also encourage questions to the community hosts and tour leaders. Most participants want to know what it's really like to live there. How do you structure common meals? How much is the common house used and for what activities? How do you resolve conflict? How onerous are the meetings? What do you like best (and least) about living in cohousing? Tour participants also receive a packet of flyers announcing the existence of forming groups in the area, "ads" for units available for resale and promotional pieces for area communities that are seeking new neighbors for projects in development or under construction. Because some participants are from out of the area (even out of state) and everyone on the tour has friends and relatives in other parts of the country, tour leaders also provide information about cohousing nationwide as requested. By now you can probably see how tours help to market cohousing by engaging people fully with the process, introducing them to others with whom they might wish to collaborate and alerting them to the realities of finding a site, building and then living in cohousing.



*Cobo/US bus tour leader David Ergo answers questions in front of the kid's play area at Southside Park Cohousing in Sacramento, C.A. (Photo by Evangeline Welch)*

*Joani Blank has lived in cohousing since 1992, has visited over 70 of our built communities, and has led or co-led ten Cobo/US-sponsored cohousing tours in California and eight elsewhere in the US. She was formerly the Association's national tours coordinator.*

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