



Cohousing: a 'natural' for universal design

By Matt Daly and Myfan Jordan

Finding a housing type that will suit us across the typical Australian lifecourse is daunting. Our design needs can change according to whether we are young and fit adults, parents of young children, living with a disability - as one in four Australians will at some stage - or ageing, and potentially less mobile ageing.

The suburban homes which are designed for family life are out of reach for many families. Apartment or 'townhouse' living, typically two storey, smaller rooms and negligible garden space are becoming the more common design. They are a typology which may be one way for younger Australians and young families to 'get on the property ladder', but they are often not suitable as we age into older families, let alone into retirement. The unsuitability of new housing and apartments model may be one reason that the turnover rate of property in Australia reached its highest level in 12 years in 2021.¹

Across our lives, our accommodation needs typically change quite significantly; this is why advocates have spent many years fighting for 'livable' housing design standards to be mandated and not 'voluntary' in the National Construction Code. While this was finally achieved to the [silver standard in 2022](#), the gold standard 'ideal' of livability, which includes the seven principles of universal design, remains optional, meaning much newly constructed housing is unsuitable for a significant cohort of the population.^{2 3}

This is where cohousing can offer a real alternative. Well established in Europe and the US as a collaborative and community-led housing alternative, cohousing communities are designed for the residents, in conjunction with the residents. This typically means they are designed as inclusive and accessible places where residents can age in place, whether that means growing up or growing old.

So what exactly is cohousing?

¹<https://www.corelogic.com.au/news-research/news/archive/housing-turnover-reaches-the-highest-level-in-nearly-12-years>

² <https://universaldesignaustralia.net.au/7-principles-of-universal-design/>

³ The Australian Capital Territory (ACT) mandated a silver standard of accessibility in 2022. See <https://www.cmtedd.act.gov.au/open-government/inform/act-government-media-releases/vassarotti/2021/act-government-secures-national-mandatory-accessible-standards>



DEFINITION AND HISTORY OF COHOUSING

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) describes cohousing as '*a form of residential development designed to emphasize community interaction while retaining and respecting individual privacy.*' While every cohousing project reflects the values of its members, everyone retains their own private dwelling, yet also can access benefits such as a common room and kitchen where the community can share a regular meal, a garden area, shared library or workshop. Many communities offer guest spaces, or even vehicles.

Cohousing aims to recapture the positive aspects of village life in a modern context. Cohousing originated in Denmark in the 1960s, but despite migrating to numerous other countries, has been slow to take off in Australia. This may be changing however, with the many cohousing groups currently working to realise a project, some explicitly focused on addressing accessibility needs.

Women in Cohousing (WinC) for example, are a group of women ranging in age from 50 – 80 years. [WinC](#) have just purchased land in Castlemaine in Victoria and will design a village of 30 units, with common house, workshop and gardens included. WinC's aim is to create 'a community based on collaboration, sustainability, accessibility, and a blend of opportunities for privacy and for social interaction'.

In the US, [Bay State Cohousing](#) is a new cohousing that has been designed based not only upon 'the current situation of each resident, but through envisioning shifting relationships, changing and aging bodies, and future members'.

COHOUSING IN AUSTRALIA

At the core of cohousing, and similar 'collaborative' ways of living, we see people coming together to share in the design and running of a small community. Importantly, the value of getting both the 'built' and the 'social' environment right are emphasised. In practice, this can range from groups with the skills, time and inclination coordinating everything themselves (e.g. [Narara Ecovillage](#) and typical cohousing models), to teaming up with an ethically-oriented developer (e.g. [Urban Coup](#) and Nightingale, or [Eltham Cohousing](#) and Property Collectives); or through a community housing provider (e.g. [Murundaka](#) and Common Equity).



However, it is also important that we continue to advocate for cooperative and cohousing models in social and public housing, to support people living with lifelong disabilities, and their family carers, to be able to access decent and inclusive housing through a community housing provider such as Victoria-based [Common Equity Housing Ltd.](#)

Plenty has been written about cohousing and its benefits. For older people and people living with disability, cohousing can address common issues, supporting Australian to⁴:

- Age in place in a community that they feel connected to;
- Avoid feeling isolated by ensuring they are part of a supportive community;
- Offer a sense of purpose through shared governance;
- Provide opportunities for informal care and support from other residents;
- Reduce costs and environmental impact by sharing resources and equipment.

WHAT COHOUSING AUSTRALIA ARE DOING

Creating a cohousing project can be difficult under Australia's current policy, construction, and planning rules. For would-be residents, this typically means embarking on a long journey working closely with and relying on other people, to realise their dream, access funding and land, and work with a developer or architect to build their dream community.

Fortunately, there is a deep reservoir of resources to draw upon, with a growing number of fully-recognised Australian cohousing communities and professionals keen to share their expertise. As the peak body for cohousing, CoHousing Australia advises, supports and connects people across Australia, coordinating research and advocating to government and relevant bodies to help overcome some of the barriers groups can face. For instance, where people might be 'asset rich but income poor', we can offer guidance around legal and banking barriers.

At the end of the day, what we all want are housing and retirement living models that allow residents a much greater say in the homes - and communities - in which they live .

Are you interested in learning more about cohousing?

See [our website](#) or [sign up to become a CoHousing Australia member.](#)

⁴ <https://www.uts.edu.au/isf/explore-research/projects/co-housing-seniors>