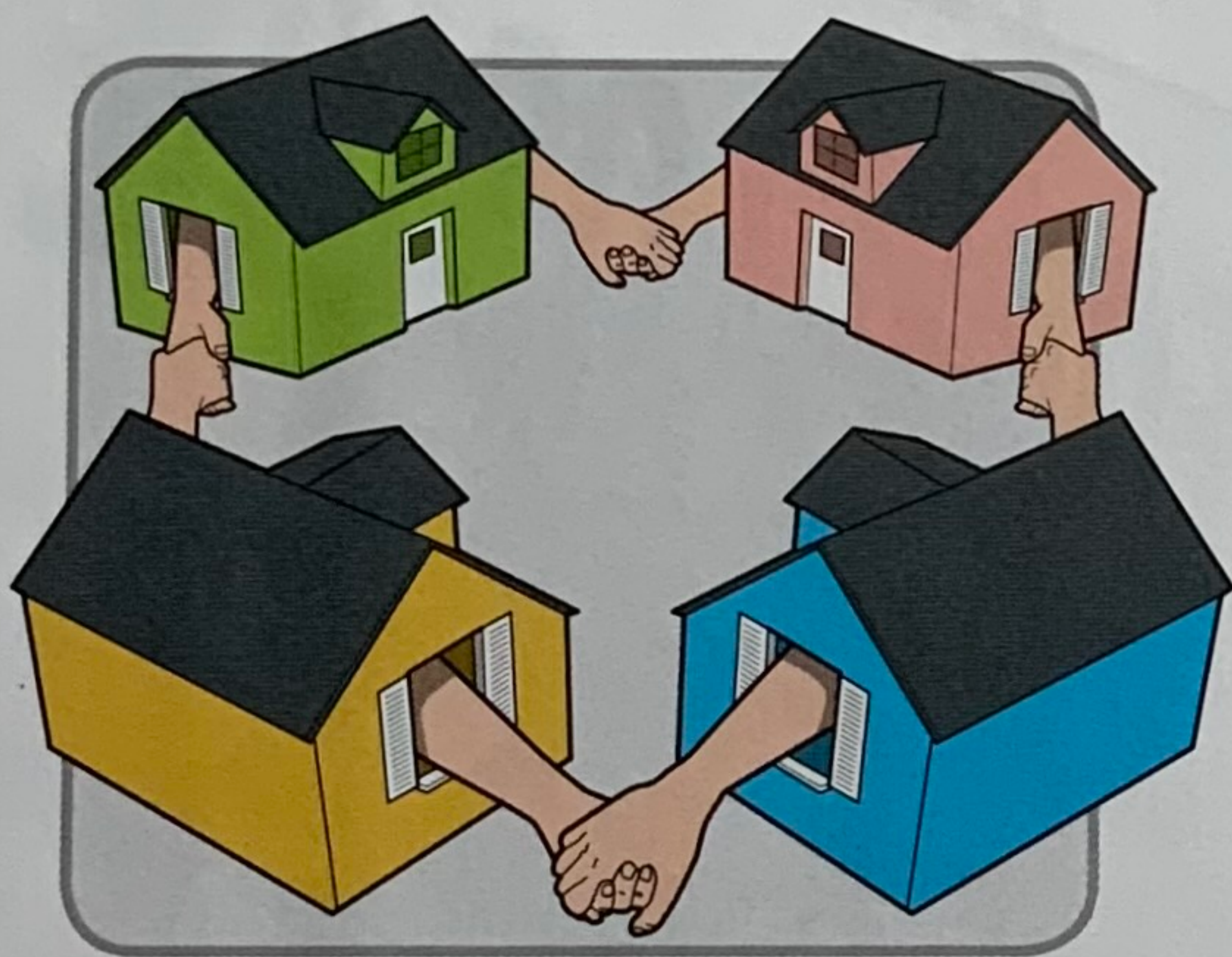




Conscious Communities

Cohousing is changing how Coloradans build new developments—and view their neighbors.

BY PETRA SPIESS

When Matt Worswick was younger and thought about his ideal place to live, he pictured the typical American dream with a slight twist: a house of his own, but solar powered and on a hill, totally independent from everyone else. If the rest of the world were to “blow up,” Matt would still have his. His dream of the perfect little energy-independent cabin in the woods persisted, but his vision of the ideal dwelling took an unexpected turn when friends exposed him to the idea of cohousing, starting him down a path of learning about community that led to “a personal transformation.”

Realizing that living with other people was the way to go, he and his wife, Linda, founded Harmony Village cohousing in Golden in 1992. They recruited neighbors by word of mouth, people who helped them plan and design the community before finally moving into the village in 1996. So far, the community is working: Of the 27 households in Harmony, only five have gone up for resale in 10 years.

Cohousing is a form of participatory community planning and living that originated in Denmark in the early 1970s, started by dual-income couples that were looking for childcare alternatives and safer surroundings. Here in the United States, where close-knit neighborhoods usually pop up only by accident, the goal of cohousing devotees is to know and work with their neighbors to create a real community. There are currently more than 15 cohousing communities in various stages of development in Colorado that cover the population spectrum from rural to suburban to urban. (They also can be grouped by age; one Arvada community is for seniors only.) The trend is emerging nationwide as well: Of the 200 cohousing communities listed in the directory for the Cohousing Association of the United States, approximately half are just forming or in development.

Cohousing communities consist of individual, privately owned residences—generally between 10 and 60 clustered townhomes or single-family homes—with shared facilities and spaces such as a common house, community garden, and parks. The common house functions as an oft-used community center; most cohousing communities have shared meals there several times a week. But yes—to answer the question most frequently posed to cohousing residents—everyone’s home still has its own private kitchen.

Right now your brain probably is whispering something like “freaky commune,” but quash that stereotype. True, many people who are attracted to cohousing tend to share some similar traits: a sense of adventure, environmental consciousness, and liberal political leanings, and the very nature of these developments lends itself to certain ways of thinking. But the majority of cohousing communities are not based around a specific ideology or belief per se, apart from a shared desire to live in a social community. Cohousing philosophy stresses inclusiveness, attracting diverse residents. The communities are inherently green, and many of them actively integrate environmental tools and practices such as solar panels, passive solar orientation, recycling, and organic community gardens. “We’re of different religions, different backgrounds, but we do have, I think, a liberal ideology and a commitment to recycling,” says Andrea Schweitzer, a resident of River Rock Commons in Fort Collins.

Early cohousing communities have often been self-contained, independent neighborhoods, but increasingly—especially in Colorado—they are nestled within larger areas, specifically in new-urbanist developments. Full disclosure: I live in a new-urbanist neighborhood in Westminster that’s so social, it’s become de facto cohousing. I know almost all my neighbors and interact with them frequently,

often sharing meals together. (And beer—especially beer.)

New urbanism and cohousing share a similar basic philosophy: the promotion of social interaction through design, which includes ample publicly shared spaces; an emphasis on people over cars (e.g., garages in the back or separate from homes, and broad sidewalks); and other architectural elements such as porches built to encourage neighbors to effortlessly interact. The big difference is that while new-urbanist areas such as Stapleton, for example, were designed to help promote social interaction, a return to the “good old days” of town squares and familiarity with one’s neighbors, mixing and mingling is not necessarily expected. Many people choose new-urbanist neighborhoods because they like the architecture, or they want the ability to live in the suburbs yet stumble home from a bar without driving. They aren’t necessarily there because they appreciate that their community was specifically designed to encourage them to befriend the people down the block.

Although social participation isn’t required by cohousing communities and there are plenty of opportunities for privacy, you wouldn’t move to one to be a hermit; these people want to know you—and know you well. “Of course there’s an expectation [of social interaction],” Schweitzer says. “If you never want to speak to your neighbors, don’t move into cohousing.”

The two philosophies also differ in residents’ design participation. The developer of my neighborhood asked for our input on the design of our clubhouse and pool (changing the plans to include a kiddie pool once we realized the area would have many more children than anticipated). But we didn’t dictate much about the rest of the planning; in many cohousing communities, residents have a say about almost every design decision.

The time spent working together on a new cohousing community forms strong bonds long before people move in. “You’re involved with the process, working together, having meetings for years before you actually get anything built,” Worswick says. “So when you move in, you know your neighbors, you know their personalities, their quirks, and you’ve also learned to work together as a group.”

Cohousing residents generally commit their time to help maintain the common areas, scheduling that’s worked out by a resident-staffed homeowners’ association that relies on consensus—not merely on majority—when disputes arise. Contrasted with the squabbling, unproductive nature of many typical HOAs, this type of conflict resolution tends to work well in cohousing because people have gotten to know each other well and already are in the spirit of working together. Selling property is unrestricted—they don’t “prescreen” potential residents, relying instead on self-selection, trusting that people who aren’t into the cohousing philosophy won’t buy there.

Such is the local appeal of cohousing that the nonprofit Cohousing Association of the United States (CoHo/US) is based right here in Boulder. It’s the first stop for any would-be cohousing community and a valuable tool to help grassroots cohousing efforts cut through all the red tape involved in real estate development. People can also work with design/build/consulting firms that specialize in cohousing development and can make the process easier and faster. (The largest cohousing developer in the nation, Wonderland Hill, also in Boulder, built most of Colorado’s cohousing communities.)

Another key factor that motivates many people to choose cohousing is the security it offers. “I’ve never felt safer in a community because I do know everybody. Because the community opens up into itself, you would be really dumb to try and break into cohousing,” says Annie Russell, a resident of Wild Sage in Boulder. And, of course,

there are the numerous scenarios, both routine and emergencies, where knowing people who live close by is a big benefit. “You need a babysitter—quick—you can just call somebody up. You need help with moving something, you need to borrow a tool. When big things happen—somebody gets injured, somebody dies—immediately the support comes out,” Worswick says. “All the sudden these neighbors that you may just say ‘hi’ to and haven’t talked to in months will show up and say, ‘Can I cook you dinner, can I give you a ride, what do you need?’”

This prescribed closeness with people who frequently start out as strangers does raise the question: What if you don’t like someone? “I think there’s a misunderstanding that

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Cohousing Resources

- **Cohousing Association of the United States** www.cohousing.org
- **The Elder Cohousing Network** www.eldercohousing.org

BOOKS

- **Cohousing: A Contemporary Approach to Housing Ourselves.** Kathryn McCamant, Charles R. Durrett, Ellen Hertzman.
- **Reinventing Community: Stories from the Walkways of Cohousing.** David Wann.

COHOUSING COMMUNITIES IN COLORADO

- **Arvada Cohousing Community.** *Forming. Arvada.* www.whdc.com/arvada_colorado_cohousing.shtml or www.arvadacohousing.com
- **Two cohousing communities**—one intergenerational, one for seniors—to be built inside a larger new-urbanist neighborhood in Arvada.
- **Bohn Farm Community Cohousing.** *Forming. Longmont.* http://directory.cohousing.org/us_list/?action=view&page=view&record_id=20346
- **Casa Verde Commons.** *Completed 2003. Colorado Springs.* www.casaverde.us
- **Locomotive (formerly the Denver Urban Core Cohousing Initiative)** *Forming. Downtown Denver.* www.ducci.org/ or <http://www.coholocomo.org>
- **Elder Cohousing at Prospect.** *Forming. Longmont.* www.prospectnewtown.com/cohousing/index.asp
- **Greyrock Commons.** *Completed 1997. Fort Collins.* www.greyrock.org
- **Harmony Village.** *Completed 1996. Golden.* www.harmonyvillage.org
- **Hearthstone.** *Completed 2002. Denver.* www.denvercohousing.com
- **Heartwood Cohousing.** *Completed 2000. Durango.* www.heartwoodcohousing.com
- **Highline Crossing.** *Completed 1995. Littleton.* www.highlinecrossing.org
- **Lyons Valley Village.** *Under Construction. Lyons.* www.lyonsvalleyvillage.com
- **Nomad Cohousing.** *Completed 1997. Boulder.* www.nomadcohousing.org
- **Nyland.** *Completed 1993. Lafayette.* www.nylandcohousing.org
- **River Rock Commons.** *Completed 2000. Fort Collins.* www.riverrock.org
- **Silver Sage Cohousing.** *Under Construction. Senior Cohousing. Boulder.* www.silversagevillage.com
- **Wild Sage Cohousing.** *Completed 2004. Boulder.* www.wildsagecohousing.org

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was clearly the oldest house on the block and certainly the best built. It now seemed the most out of place. Out front was a "For Sale" sign. Lindberg contemplated the scene with a sigh. "I don't think it's going to make it."

Jeffrey Oliver is a contributing editor at 5280.

The Kitchen is Closed (from page 103)

up the missed payments and settling other related debts. "The quick thinking we did was about [my realtor's] ability to market it and get it sold," Johnson says.

Even though he dodged a formal foreclosure and all the nightmares that go with it, Johnson's life is far from settled. He's still searching for a full-time job and now is only "tenuously" married. "It was no small stress on my married life; it took a pretty drastic toll," he says. "We're separated and in counseling, but I'm not holding my breath. It's so debilitating when you have to start over on a house just because someone turned off the electricity when they didn't have enough power to go around." Johnson may eventually get his house back in order, but Colorado undoubtedly will see more stories like his as the foreclosure saga plays out. "The foreclosures we're seeing now are from loans that were made in the past few years," Toll says. "Given what the real estate market is doing now, this could get worse before it gets better."

Luc Hatlestad is a senior editor at 5280.

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you need to like everyone—that's not the case," Worswick says. "It's not that I dislike any of my neighbors, but you have different levels of connection with them, and if there's some that you don't relate to that well, then you're civil, you're neighborly. One of the benefits to the neighborhood thing is people are committed to being good neighbors, so even if you have differences, you do share that in common."

Collaborative living also brings some economic benefits: Everyone doesn't need to buy specific items (such as tools) when you can easily borrow one; residents of many cohousing communities pool money to purchase large items such as home-improvement equipment. Neighbors frequently offer their specific talents to the community; a yoga instructor may provide discounted or even free classes in the common house. If you



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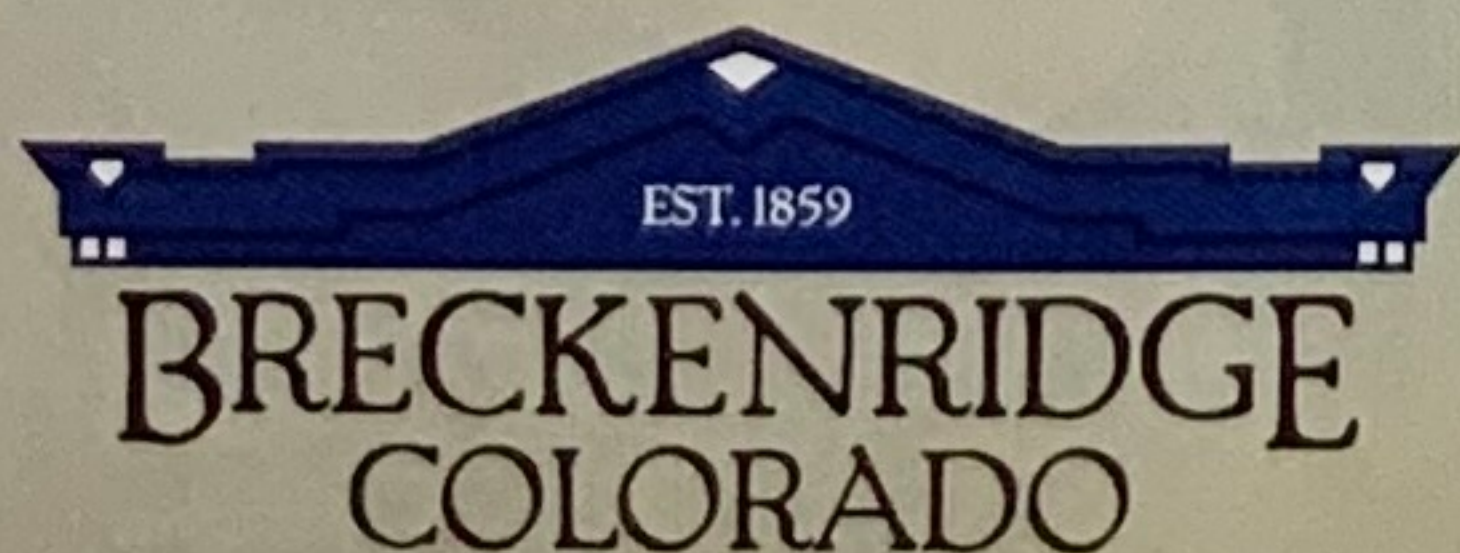
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kid loves dogs but you don't want the hassle or cost of owning one, she can borrow the neighbor's, like Worswick's daughter does. "I don't want to have a dog, but she loves them," he says. "She'll go off into the neighborhood and walk their dogs, and they'll love her for it. She's the community dog walker." And, of course, having people you trust all around you can decrease some of the expense (and stress) of childcare.

Recent studies have attested to the value of strong social networks and the perils of social isolation. Long work hours, overscheduled activities, and the car-dependent design of many of our communities take time, leaving much less for casual, unhurried socializing. This zeitgeist is captured by the uniquely modern term "play date," a series of contrived events requiring several cars and the organizational skills of a presidential secretary to get kids together for something that used to occur naturally in neighborhoods. For those who want a true community that counteracts these problems, cohousing offers a sustainable solution, and Colorado has become one of the hotbeds of this burgeoning trend.

Petra Spiess is a freelance writer with a master's degree in ecology from Colorado State University.

Lofty Ideals (from page 107)

Downtown Denver Partnership estimates that by 2025 downtown's population will grow by up to 25,000 people. Chances are good that not all of those new residents will want to live in lofts, soft or otherwise. "The people who move downtown come because there's a *here* here," Frampton says. "It's an established neighborhood, so there's a broader mix than there was in 1998, when we started [Riverfront]. Back then, everyone wanted a loft because that's all there was."

Of course, there are and always will be the folks, like us at 5280, who still crave the idea of living (or working) in lofts. "There's still a market—maybe 15 percent—of the people who love the exposed timbers," Nelsen says. "But they're generally a much younger person." And as far as the true lofts go—the Icehouses and Flour Mills—they'll always be a hot commodity because of their hip factor and finite supply. "The loft works because it's a good space," says CU professor Koste. "Is it a trend? Sure. But it's also a feeling.... Because we were trained to think that way."

Cheryl Meyers is an assistant editor at 5280.