

The Boston Globe

'Cohousing' gives kindred spirits a place to share space

By Chris Reidy, Globe Staff

Pediatrician Ofer Levy, 38, wants to make one thing clear about the "cohousing" complex that he and his family plan to move into early next year: "It's not a commune."

Under construction on the site of a former scrap-metal facility, the Jamaica Plain complex aspires to be a multigenerational mini village. The result of five years of planning, the complex will have 30 condos ranging in price from just over \$200,000 to \$499,000. There will also be a courtyard, an organic vegetable garden, and a common room where residents will frequently share meals and help watch one another's children.

According to consultant Chris ScottHanson, cohousing began 30 years ago in Denmark where people were looking for better day-care options, safer neighborhoods, and environmentally friendly housing. There are more than 70 cohousing projects in the United States, he said. The Jamaica Plain project is the latest of several in Massachusetts -- including one underway in Somerville and another percolating in the western suburbs -- where high housing costs and a forward-thinking population combine to make the state increasingly open to the concept.

But launching a cohousing project is a time-consuming gamble, as 20 or 30 households try to achieve consensus as they act as their own developer. Because members often make down payments years before their homes are built and because some members drop out before a project's completion, buying a cohousing unit is also riskier than a typical home purchase.

"It's like Evel Knievel putting a rocket on his motorcycle to jump over a canyon," said David Goodman, 45, a freelance radio show host whose wife, Jeanne, is a founding member of the group. "Having faith in your fellow human beings is essential."

To date, 26 of 27 market-rate units are under agreement, with many buyers having made a 7 percent down payment more than a year ago. The group is also responsible for carrying costs of the unsold unit, said Diane Simpson, 50, one of the group's founders and a computer graphics artist.

People who put down a chunk of their savings on a cohousing unit deposit often want to micro-manage every detail of the project, but that impulse has to be resisted, said Sheila Braun, who started a Vermont cohousing group. She "spent three years devoting every spare minute" to that effort, but the process became so intense, she said, she's now leaning against living in the project once it's completed. Braun is not involved in the JP project.

Alex Aminoff has had a better experience with the Cambridge cohousing project where he lives. In his view, children intuitively adapt to a cohousing environment, said Aminoff, adding, "Kids are better cohousers than anybody."

[At the JP project, many members will move into smaller living spaces. Units are deliberately small as a way to encourage members to share more time in the complex's common areas, said Fernando J. Domenech Jr. of Domenech Hicks & Krockmalnic, the project's architect.](#)

In a society that celebrates McMansions, adjusting to European ideas about shared space is not for everyone. To find kindred spirits, the JP group targeted young families, singles, and immigrants. One buyer is Phyllis Guiliano, an operations manager in her 50s.

"I've lived alone for a long time, and I enjoy my house," she said. "But I'd like to live in a community. For me, it's an alternative to the isolation of today's living where you don't know your neighbors. When I heard about this, I thought, 'Wow, this is for me.'"