



Institute for Sustainable Futures
University of Technology Sydney

Advancing Cohousing for Seniors

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Research team

ISF

- Professor Chris Riedy
- Laura Wynne
- Dr Kylie McKenna
- Matt Daly
- Katherine Crane

OEH

- Frouke de Reuver
- Lisa Miller

Advisory Group

- Professor Sue Benn, UTS
- Caitlin McGee, UTS
- Mark Nutting, NSW Federation of Housing Associations
- Michael Cashin, Willoughby Council
- Nathan Wort, NSW Department of Planning and Environment
- Caroline Pidcock, Pidcock Architects
- Jayne Boardman, Parramatta City Council
- Barbara Squires, Barbara Squires Consulting
- Mark Garden, Aged & Community Services NSW & ACT
- Ryan Woolcott, Dept of Family & Community Services



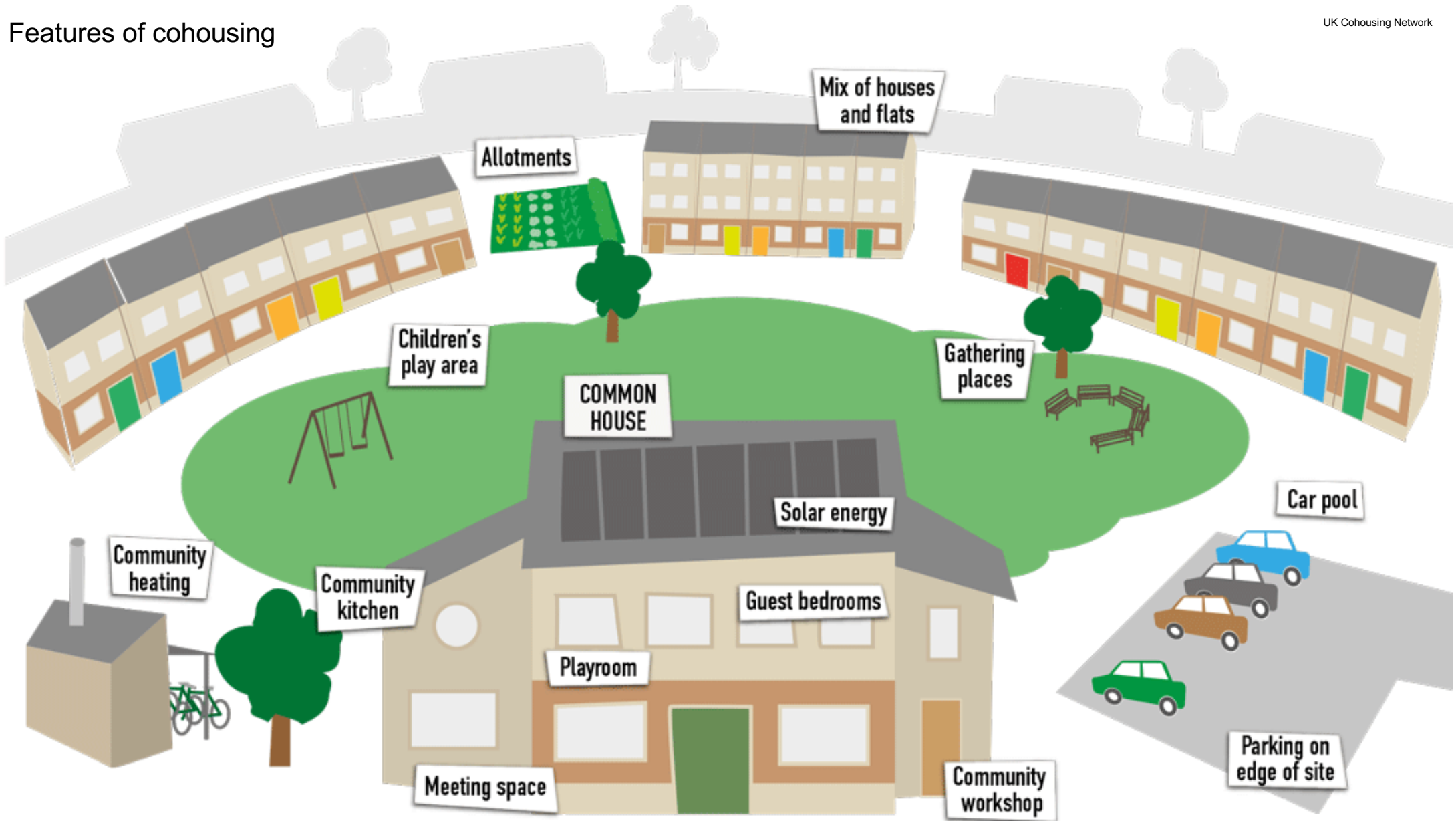
The project



Photo: Katherine Crane

Cohousing is a form of community living that contains a mix of private and communal spaces, 'combining autonomy of private dwellings with the advantages of community living' (Williams, 2005).

Features of cohousing




Typical characteristics of cohousing

- Future residents are involved in the design process to ensure the building meets their needs
- The design includes both private and shared spaces, and encourages community interaction
- Residents are usually actively involved in the governance of the property
- Often, but not always, there is a focus on reduced environmental impact
- Huge diversity in size and density



Why 'cohousing for seniors'?

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- Seniors have great wisdom to contribute to society but their contribution can be undermined by financial insecurity, poor health, isolation and disability
 - Cohousing has the potential to help seniors to age with dignity by providing:
 - an affordable home that they love
 - with excellent, accessible design
 - connected to their friends and local community across generations
 - in which they can stay independent and age in place
 - with good access to care (e.g. shared residential carers)
 - and with a positive social and environmental impact
 - Cohousing can help to address policy challenges such as an ageing population, rising health care costs and housing affordability

Research objectives

Immediate

- Increased understanding of how seniors currently make choices about housing options
- Increased understanding of the concept of cohousing, what it can offer for seniors, and which cohousing options are best suited to seniors
- Barriers to cohousing highlighted and ways to overcome those barriers identified
- A supportive community of stakeholders with a commitment to taking cohousing forward
- Strategic pathways for increasing the uptake of cohousing defined



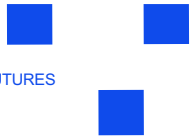
Intermediate

- Increased awareness among seniors and other relevant stakeholders of cohousing options
- Strategic actions implemented to increase the uptake of cohousing by seniors in NSW
- Demand for cohousing for NSW seniors grows



Ultimate

- More NSW seniors are able to age with dignity because they are living in a supportive cohousing environment



Project activities

- 1. Literature review
- 2. Stakeholder interviews
- 3. Observational research
- 4. Focus groups with seniors
- 5. Strategy development
- 6. Project outputs and dissemination

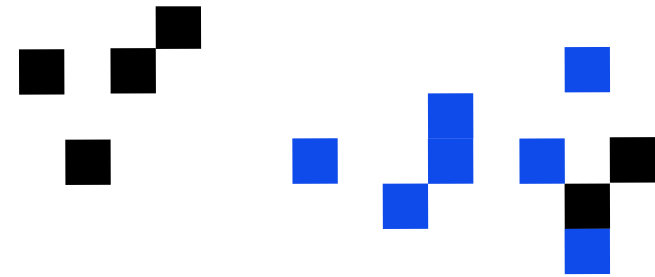


Photo: Chris Riedy



Research findings

Photo: Andrew Wutke | Nightingale Housing



Literature review

- Confirmed the challenges faced by some seniors as they negotiate their housing options:
 - Ageing population with associated health and employment challenges
 - Strong desire for independence, freedom of choice and ageing in place
 - Most seniors do not plan well for their future housing needs – choices are forced on them
 - Uneven vulnerability – private renters, single senior women particularly vulnerable, wealthy baby boomers who own property much less vulnerable
- Identified a diverse array of cohousing and related models, varying in:
 - Size – from 2 or 3 households to 40 households
 - Leadership – resident, architect or developer-led
 - Generational mix – intergenerational vs seniors-only
 - Varying amounts of sharing – from laundries and gardens to common houses and communal kitchens
 - Tenure and title – strata, company, cooperative

Interviews

15 interviews with 23 participants

Participants

- Cohousing / deliberative development projects and coordination bodies
 - Nightingale Housing
 - Murundaka Cohousing, Melbourne
 - Common Equity NSW
 - Bermagui cohousing group
- Peak bodies:
 - Seniors housing providers
 - Community housing providers
 - Cooperatives
 - Universal design proponents
- State government:
 - DPE
 - Urban Growth NSW
- Local government
- Development professionals
- Academics
- Finance



Seniors are diverse and have diverse housing needs

- Values vary widely, just like the rest of the population
- Not everyone is keen on the idea of sharing, and not everyone likes the idea of sharing with other generations
- There are generational differences, e.g. between over-55s and over 70s
 - We focused in on the 55-65 age group as our target audience
- Many are owner-occupiers with an asset that may be difficult to capitalise on due to pension and taxation rules
- Some are private renters who are particularly struggling to make ends meet
- Some are social housing occupants




There is some common ground

- People want *'to be in a decent home that's not outrageously priced. That is the number one priority'*.
- Safety and security is a shared concern
- Nobody wants to move to aged care:
 - Seniors universally want to age in place, in their own home
 - Moving to aged care is forced on people due to health care needs growing beyond what can be provided informally or through community care
 - Retirement villages are attractive but seen as expensive or not available in desired locations
- Very few people actively plan for ageing. We are in denial. We are not good at thinking about what will matter to us when we are older and our health is declining. This closes down options.


The property sector is slowly waking up to the opportunity



- Some argued that property development is dominated by those that are interested in return on investment rather than delivering liveable homes
 - The housing affordability crisis is driving a policy focus on supply and diversity
 - Universal design guidance is still getting limited traction
 - Developers are starting to see the growing seniors market as an opportunity, whose needs are not being adequately met
 - Innovative niche models are emerging:
 - Nightingale Housing – deliberative development model that shows there is pent up demand for liveable, owner-occupied multi-residential solutions that incorporate some sharing
 - Cohousing – requires passionate champions who are in it for the long haul, as securing finance and land in desired areas, in competition with developers, is extremely difficult
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Stakeholders see potential in cohousing but were unsure about the market



- Greater involvement in the design process is a key selling point
 - Cohousing supports consolidation of services as people age - care services, access to technology, universal design
 - Cohousing offers social interaction - designing for community rather than isolation
 - There were mixed views on the affordability of cohousing
 - Whether cohousing costs more or less than other housing options depends on the model and the design choices
 - Can help with diversity and flexibility, offering more choice
 - Cohousing may meet the needs of particular niche markets, e.g. the growing cohort of older single women
 - Self-governance may be attractive to some, but not everyone wants this
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Three cohousing models emerged

Deliberative
development: A
designer engages
the future
residents in co-
designing an
apartment block
with an agreed
mix of private and
shared spaces



Photo: Katherine Lu
(katherinelu.com)

Small-scale cohousing:
A group of friends or
family coming together
to convert a large
existing family house or
a couple of adjacent
blocks into two to four
smaller dwellings with a
mix of private and
shared spaces.





Cooperative tenancy:
Tenants form a cooperative to self-manage the property that they occupy, usually with support from a cooperative management company

Photo: Chris Grose | Murundaka

Focus groups

Six focus groups testing different cohousing models

- Deliberative development (2 groups)
 - Inner Sydney, seniors, owner-occupiers, pre- and post-retirement
 - Parramatta, intergenerational, owner-occupiers and tenants
- Small-scale cohousing (2 groups)
 - Parramatta, seniors, owner-occupiers, pre and post retirement, detached dwellings
 - Nowra, as above
- Cooperative tenancy (1 group)
 - Intergenerational, pre and post-retirement, existing residents in cooperative tenancy
- Cohousing developers (1 group):
 - Balmain, observation of an intergenerational group seeking to establish cohousing, 'The AGENCY Group'



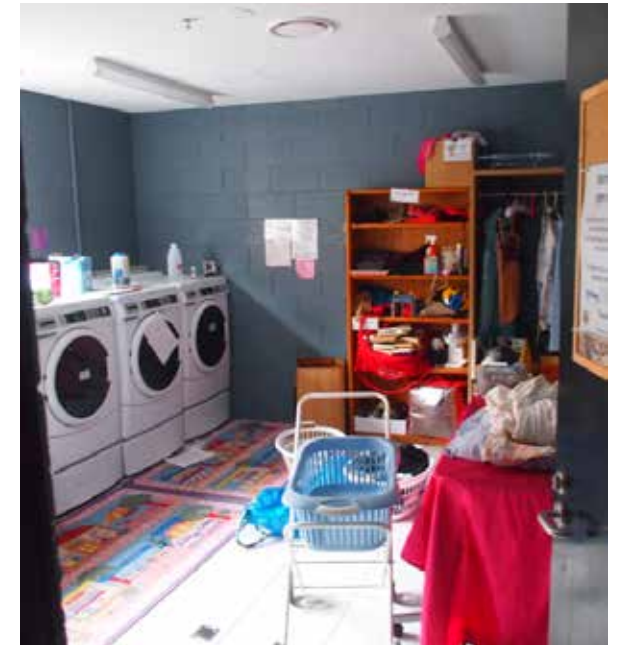
1. Low awareness of cohousing and its benefits



- Almost no participants had heard of cohousing, although some were able to guess (accurately) that it involves sharing living space
- Only a couple of participants in each focus group were immediately enthusiastic about the idea – most thought it was ‘a nice idea, but not for me’
 - Although note that 2 or 3 people in a focus group of 10 is potentially a significant market
- The social, economic and environmental benefits of cohousing were not well understood
- Participants struggled to differentiate cohousing from other housing models, e.g. granny flats, strata apartments, semis

2. Resistance to sharing

- Participants felt they had ‘done their time’ and earned the right to their independence, which meant not having to share
- Even relatively minimal forms of sharing, such as sharing laundries, were met with scepticism
- There were concerns about others ‘not doing their bit’
- Some participants mentioned the need to maintain particular standards (e.g. of dress) when sharing spaces, which encroaches on their freedom (e.g. to lounge about in PJs)
- Participants zeroed in on ‘extreme’ forms of sharing, losing sight of the ability to decide for themselves how much sharing to include



3. Reluctance to engage in ongoing management

- Participants in the main focus groups were not particularly interested in doing the work of ongoing governance of cohousing
- They were concerned about the laborious nature of consensus decision-making
- They were also concerned about management of conflict and the ability to 'evict' people
 - Although note that conflict is equally likely in strata environments and may be easier to navigate in a cohousing situation where there is some commitment to the building community
- The Balmain group was very different, seeing the opportunity for self-governance as a key benefit of cohousing

4. Increased community interaction is welcome but secondary to privacy and location

- Most participants wanted to remain in the area they were in
- They could see benefits from community interaction, but many felt they already had connection to a community so did not need to create one (particularly in the regional group)
- Cohousing with family seemed slightly more popular than cohousing with friends or strangers
- In contrast, the Balmain group saw community interaction as a big advantage



5. Freedom of choice is central to housing preferences

- Participants were concerned by the lack of housing options available to them, and the likelihood of being forced into particular choices
- Retirement was not always a clear cut choice, but something that was forced on them, making planning for retirement difficult
- Cohousing would be welcome as another choice, but that doesn't mean a lot of people will take it up

6. Participants were quick to identify barriers

- As well as concerns about the practicalities of sharing, participants raised concerns about:
 - Council restrictions that disallow cohousing
 - Title and inheritance issues
 - The impact on pension eligibility
 - Financing
 - Breakdown of friendships

In their own words...

In theory it all sounds lovely but in practice can it work? Maybe people could cook in their apartments and bring food to the communal area.

Australians by nature want to do their own thing. It's different to Europe and US – we're used to the quarter acre block.

But I like the idea of living near people, checking in on each other. I lived next door to a woman who had a fall and died. Maybe she could have been found earlier.



Key insights

1. Cohousing is little known
2. Groups shared many of the concerns that cohousing is trying to address, but balked at the term and some specific models
 - Suggests cohousing has an image problem, is misunderstood, other terms may be preferable
3. Groups often got stuck on extreme examples that might not be representative
 - Suggests a need to tailor information to the individual, provide demonstration projects
4. Recruitment bias – people that agree to participate in a focus group are typically more socially connected and arguably less in need of cohousing
5. Some participants were always interested
 - Suggests a need to connect and support this minority

Key insights (continued)

6. Participation in design and development was popular, which supports models like Nightingale Housing
7. Participation in ongoing governance was less popular, which points to a need for facilitators
8. Clear conflict management procedures are needed
9. Some preference for sharing outdoor spaces
10. Less interest in regional areas.



Photo: Andrew Wutke | Nightingale Housing

Proposed responses

1. Awareness raising and myth busting

- Fact sheet and guides on cohousing
- Demonstration / pilot projects
- Marketing campaign - but who would run this?
- Try before you buy
- Public events
- Student projects

2. Connect and support interested people

- Interactive web platform to channel seniors towards the most suitable model, provide tailored information
- Web platform to connect interested seniors with others in their area (e.g. Henry Project)
- Facilitation and governance services so that seniors don't have to do it all themselves
- Detailed 'how to guides', e.g. on conflict management, financing, approvals, titles
- Training in cohousing development, conflict resolution etc



Proposed responses

3. Government support and regulatory reform

- Policy support for cohousing as a response to housing challenges
- Demonstrate cohousing in major developments, e.g. Bays Precinct, other Urban Growth developments
- The above could be linked to a design competition to develop appropriate cohousing solutions for Sydney
- Reforms to remove any barriers related to taxation, pension eligibility, local government planning restrictions
- Direct financial support, e.g grants program
- Centrelink advice on pension impacts

4. Adopt in other housing models

- Retirement villages, mainstream housing

5. Further research

- Survey research to test broader appeal and market size, further clarify the audience for each model
- Test out alternative terms, such as co-living
- Clarify financial models, particularly for small-scale cohousing



Project outputs

- Literature Review – Cohousing for Seniors
- Three fact sheets
 - What is cohousing?
 - Three cohousing models
 - The sustainability benefits of cohousing
- This presentation, summarising findings
- Academic publications (under development)

All publications

available at

<http://bit.ly/2sqP7uR>



Bibliography

Williams, J. (2005). Designing neighbourhoods for social interaction: The case of cohousing. *Journal of Urban Design*, 10(2), 195–227.

