

Cohousing Communities

Designing for High-Functioning Neighborhoods



Charles Durrett, Architect, AIA

with Jinglin Yang, Alex Lin, Spencer Nash, & Nadthachai Kongkhajornkidsuk

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Cohousing Communities

About the Cover

It only takes two things to get a high-functioning community built—a vision and a clear set of steps.

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CHARLES DURRETT, ARCHITECT, AIA

**WITH JINGLIN YANG, ALEX LIN, SPENCER NASH,
AND NADTHACHAI KONGKHAJORNKIDSUK**

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This book is dedicated to all those who teach us that architecture is more than “sexy” façades. Architecture is about making lives and environments better. Architecture can help facilitate a more viable society, and architecture and its associated social settings can address our most noble intentions in building healthier and just realities.

And this book is to the brave souls—the mothers, the fathers, the grandmothers and the grandfathers—who ventured forth to make these environments real.

This book is to all the children that motivated us and deserve a social life that is vibrant and makes them healthy, nurtured, and wise.

And lastly to the bookstores that facilitate the culture change that we need, and to all of the planners, commissioners, councilors, and administrators who know that smarter land use can start with high-functioning neighborhoods like cohousing.

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Introduction

"For me, architecture is a social act."

David Adjaye

Five years of architecture school in California did not prepare me for designing community-enhanced neighborhoods or cohousing communities. Cohousing was a foreign concept here in the U.S. and even the notion of multi-family with enhanced community facilities, such as a place to break bread together, sharing tools, lawnmowers and cars; private kitchens oriented toward common spaces, and remote parking to keep the center free of cars, is rare. Realizing this, Kathryn McCamant and I went off to Denmark to study cohousing design and community-enhanced developments from the best of the best in the world; from the people who started cohousing in Denmark (Jan Gudmand-Høyer), perfected it (Tegnestuen Vandkunsten), and mastered its programming (Jan Gehl and Hans Skifter Anderson). Once we had convinced our many mentors there that we were serious (and not just another looky-loo), it was obvious to them and us that we were not ready to practice after only six months. So, we stayed for another seven months before we felt like we could design cohousing and community-enhanced housing as well as they had done. It was too important to do otherwise. As an architect, it wouldn't be ethical for me to take a penny from anyone to design their community or even to say that I could if I didn't know exactly what I was doing. A routine knee surgery op might be easy with learned hands, but you wouldn't want it to be the surgeon's first time, not to mention they not having gone to medical school.

EMERYVILLE, CA

The second cohousing community finished in the U.S., completed in two years. Most of the residents were born outside of the U.S. and had experienced true community previously in their lives, so they were excited to embrace it again.



Undoubtedly the most important lesson we learned was that the difference between what works to enhance community and what doesn't can be subtle, but the results are vast and the impact on a community is permanent. For example, in a poorly designed cohousing community, a common house might receive less than 50 people-hours of use per week, whereas in a well-designed cohousing community, the common house might receive more than 450 people-hours per week. And they both cost about \$500,000 to build! Whether it's people-hours in the common house or people-hours on the sidewalks, individual smiles per half-hour, or collective smiles per half-hour, design makes all the difference.

My mantra is, "If it doesn't work socially, why bother?" How to make that happen is not always obvious. Subtle design factors affect how people feel about their community and their own homes. For instance, buildings that feature natural light have a major positive impact on these feelings. Likewise, the relationships between spaces and other experiential metrics (how close or far things are from each other, acoustics, and hundreds of other little details) affect how happy people are collectively. The arrangement of spaces across the landscape, the common house location, and the floor plans of the private houses impact how happy people are and affect the experiential progressions of what happens first, second, third, and so on as residents walk through the site. These design decisions all have major implications on the social metrics of a given community, such as the amount of conversation on the sidewalks to the number of times people visit each other's houses. All this is to say that this book is a critical resource for anyone interested in living in, learning about, or designing a high-functioning neighborhood. With it, you will have a much better idea of what really matters and why.

Cohousing Communities: Designing for High-Functioning Neighborhoods is designed to help local architects, both new and experienced, to successfully create these enhanced communities. Very



PLEASANT HILL, CA

The common building, be it in cohousing or in any community-based design, is the heart of the site plan. It is the essential neutral common place that plays a big role in transforming a collection of houses into a high-functioning neighborhood.

few architects have experience in designing cohousing or high-functioning neighborhoods. Even after designing more than 50 cohousing communities and a hundred multi-family buildings and/or neighborhoods, I am still learning. I always feel like my next one will be the best one. I want you, the designer and consumer, to have the best point of departure that you can— informed by what we have learned over the past 40 years. This knowledge must be shared for future generations of architects who hope to create housing that provides people with more than just a place to sleep, eat, and watch TV. When the Danish architects Jan Gudmand-Høyer and Angels Colom both retired at the same time, the result was noticeable. Upon losing two of the most experienced architects in Denmark, cohousing and neighborhood design there took a dive. Multi-family developments in Denmark started to feel like apartments again, instead of communities. During those years, ironically, seven Danish architects did six-month internships in our office. After returning home to Denmark, they went on to design extremely successful new cohousing communities, and a second wave of success is well underway again there.

I suspect that less than 1 percent of the U.S. population today lives in a high-functioning neighborhood—places where people feel a strong sense of belonging, identity, and accountability; where everyone knows each other's names, cares about each other, and are prepared to support each other in times of need. A client once told me that she lived in an attractive neighborhood cluster for five years, designed by a famous architect. During her time living there, not one person ever came to her front door. Not once. The houses may have been nice, but the neighborhood was not a high-functioning one. In the case of community-enhanced design, it's as much a political act as anything else. Private developers, non-profit developers, and city planners take a lot of convincing to build community-enhanced neighborhoods. But that is changing too. My hope is that this book

COTATI, CA

Best in American Living Award – Best Smart Growth Community 2004 by the National Association of Home Builders. It makes sense, and these moms sitting here had a huge role in planning this project. Too often it's the businessmen, bureaucrats, builders, and bankers who make all the relevant decisions in housing. That's wrong. Everyday residents know how to make a high-functioning neighborhood.



will serve as a tool to guide a much bigger market to community-enhanced design than currently subscribes to it.

This book is also designed to get more people interested in a career in social architecture. If you're interested in sociology and art, you may discover, with one stroke of the pen, the huge difference that you can make in people's lives, emotional well-being, and in their appreciation of the environment. Collectively those strokes add up to a setting, a meaning, and reaching out, as methods for living lighter on the planet while living better and getting along with others at the same time.

Finally, this book was written in collaboration with four millennials: Jinglin Yang, Alex Lin, Spencer Nash, and Nadthachai Kongkhajornkidsuk. If we are going to make headway in the future, millennials need to have a seat at the table.

You will notice that here at The Cohousing Company we approach architecture from an anthropological point of view. We design communities for people. We start the process by asking key questions: Who are these people? What are they seeking? What are their experiences? What are their values? Who are they as a culture, or at least as a subculture? How do relationships and kinships actually work, and how do they wish them to work into the future?

DESIGN FOR STRONG COMMUNITIES

Cohousing Communities is about how to successfully design cohousing and community-enhanced multi-family housing, for-sale condominiums, for-rent apartments, and subsidized affordable projects. Strong communities and positive neighborly relationships are worth it—they are not injured

by proximity but enhanced by it. I began this book by looking at condominium and cohousing common facilities exclusively. However, on my first day of writing, I realized that successful common facilities rely on the plans of the site and of the private houses as well. In other words, as the German philosopher G.W. Hegel would say: It's all connected. The data in this book was informed by my visits to over 300 cohousing communities in Europe and studying a hundred of them in great detail, designing over 50 cohousing communities in North America, and consulting on many more around the world; and, just as important, by having lived in three cohousing communities over the past 37 years: Trudslund in Denmark, Emeryville in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Nevada City in rural California.

There is a lot of conversation in North America about how to scale-up cohousing—how to make more of them faster. McDonaldization is not the solution. At 300 communities in a country of five million, Denmark has more cohousing per capita than any other country and likely will for a long time to come. They use a slower and more thorough organic approach with an eye toward quality and duration. Every project is a model of what we can reach—not a compromise, not an ode to the rearview mirror. Yes, we need to make projects even more affordable, and, yes, we have to make cohousing more accessible and ethnically diverse. But these are not just words; we can accomplish more with deliberate outreach and work than by any other means. When The Cohousing Company won the World Habitat Award, presented by the United Nations in Osaka, Japan, in 2001, for a cohousing community in Atlanta, Georgia, it was a clear sign that the UN recognized that a change to the status quo of a home's environment was necessary. The American middle class needs to find a much smaller footprint. They simply produce too much pollution per capita. The U.S. has an average per capita footprint of 16.2 tons per year, followed by Canada at 15.6 tons. That large-scale metric is perhaps best understood when it's illustrated on a personal scale. The example of Butch, a resident from a nearby cohousing community, comes to mind. Butch told me that he was burning five to six



TRUDESUND

The carefully considered nooks and crannies of this site are based on the work of the best cohousing programmer in Denmark. Life between these buildings is measurably successful from both a community and privacy point of view. There is a balance: plenty of private outdoor space plus compelling and inviting common space.

VALLEY OAKS. AFFORDABLE HOUSING SONOMA, CA

A 41-unit affordable housing project designed to be as community enhanced as possible. Parking at the periphery allows kids to play, parents to discuss, and old folks to relate to each other face-to-face in the interior. Subsidized projects with community-enhanced architecture are easier to manage because accountability among neighbors kicks in.



tanks of gas per month for the 20 years he lived in his old single-family house. Now that he lives in cohousing, he burns less than one tank per month while living in the same town.

Community-enhanced neighborhoods needn't be more difficult or complicated. It's actually simpler and a lot easier to get right, if you are organized and deliberate. Yes, the methodologies presented in this book drill down and turn over the rocks. And, yes, the Danes have practicing anthropologists and working sociologists who help get cohousing projects off the ground. But architects can learn these disciplines too—although they have to be motivated to do so. Once you've done it a couple of times, it gets easier, but it really helps if you do the first one with a mentor who knows exactly what they are doing. The trick is to see a culture (that is, a group of residents) for who they really are and who they really want to become.

WHAT IS A FUNCTIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD?

What is the definition of a functional neighborhood? Well, imagine that you are the city council and supporting working people and cutting costs are key goals. You would want to invest in, more than anything else, high-functioning neighborhoods. In some neighborhoods people know each other, care about each other, and support each other. In some neighborhoods people know how to share resources, assist each other, and talk to each other about opportunities to cooperate or to mediate disagreements. In some neighborhoods a disabled senior can get dinner from neighbors or a ride

to the pharmacy. Someone can pick up groceries routinely if necessary, or a child can safely car-pool home with a neighbor if a parent needs to stay at work for another critical half an hour. These neighborhoods and relationships are built on trust and community. Some of these neighborhoods do exist in the United States. They exemplify the sense of strong community and unity that are the building blocks of a functioning society. Conversely, they offer a solution to many ills that result from social isolation and estrangement.

This book started before the COVID-19 pandemic, straddled it, and finished in what seemed to be the pandemic's waning months in the United States. During that time, most people in communities supported each other in meaningful ways and helped each other to stay safe. People often ask us at The Cohousing Company, "How might you alter your designs because of what you learned during the pandemic?" The answer is simple. We would make even more certain that the design facilitates community in the good times (non-pandemic) so that when the bad times come (pandemic or otherwise), people have relationships that they can rely on to help each other to make it through. Cohousing and community-enhanced design allow people to be socially distanced, but not socially isolated. Ultimately, it's community-enhanced designs that help us create a better functioning society.



SAVVAERKET IN HØJBJERG, DENMARK

This is what a high-functioning neighborhood looks like, feels like.

The life between buildings is a direct result of architecture and planning. This book outlines how design can be used to stitch the reality of a high-functioning neighborhood and village together.



NEVADA CITY, CA

Common lunch in a socially separated but not socially isolated community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Relationships must go on. Relationships are built during the good times so that they transcend the bad times.





NEVADA CITY, CA

The houses are different when the design's purpose is to get people connected and to keep them connected. The kitchen sinks face the common walkways. The living rooms are located toward the back. Folks tend not to close their blinds then—they don't mind being seen washing the dishes.



NEVADA CITY, CA

Central but remote parking and central nonvehicular circulation play positive roles in sustaining community. The social community is actually built during the development phase—not brick by brick, but decision by decision. The right architecture and planning are key to maintaining the community once the honeymoon period has worn off after move in.



VALLEY VIEW SENIOR HOMES AMERICAN CANYON, CA

There is so much to learn from high-functioning neighborhoods. Many small changes can be incorporated into low-functioning neighborhoods in order to make them more high-functioning.



NEVADA CITY, CA

Love is where the dog is and where the people are—on the sidewalks, in between the houses in the car-free area.

NEVADA CITY, CA

This isn't Italy, France, Spain, Denmark, or a village in Tanzania where neighbors routinely hang out. This is an American neighborhood where there are opportunities for neighbors to gather spontaneously with no other agenda than to say, "What's up with you?"



**OLD NEIGHBORHOOD,
NEW COMMON
BUILDING**

A neighborhood of single-family houses asked us to design a new common building (technically an outbuilding to one of the houses) to meet their needs and desires for facilitating an enhanced community. They wanted not only a place to come together to meditate and dance, but a place to meet, talk, plan, coordinate care for elderly residents, and to break bread. They wanted a space that was right in the middle of the 30 residential houses that everyone could walk to. Still under construction, the barn raising itself played a consequential role in stitching the community together tightly. Whether it was pulling electrical wire or making lunch, everyone contributed and— in collaboration with the contractor—even made trusses. It was all doable.





QUIMPER VILLAGE, WA
Some would argue that the front porch is the most important room in the house.



COTATI, CA
Simple and frequent—having dinner together. It's not a buffet, it's not a wedding reception, we're not in the Navy—we're just sitting down to have dinner with people who we know, care about, and support.



BELLINGHAM, WA

Pedestrian-friendly, car-free environment makes people feel safe without the smell, the sound, and the threat of autos.

Intergenerational Cohousing Design

In too many neighborhoods everyone is a stranger. Streets are dominated by cars, empty sidewalks, rows of houses behind fences, and closed garage doors. The residents mostly keep to themselves. Adults watch TV by themselves; kids play video games alone. But in community-enhanced neighborhoods, everyone knows each other, cares about each other, and supports each other. The difference between these two kinds of neighborhoods is palpable, and the lives that are led in them are noticeably different.



BELLINGHAM, WA

Strong relationships are what make neighborhoods work over time, but the design plays a huge role in fostering or detracting from those relationships.

Intergenerational Neighborhood Design

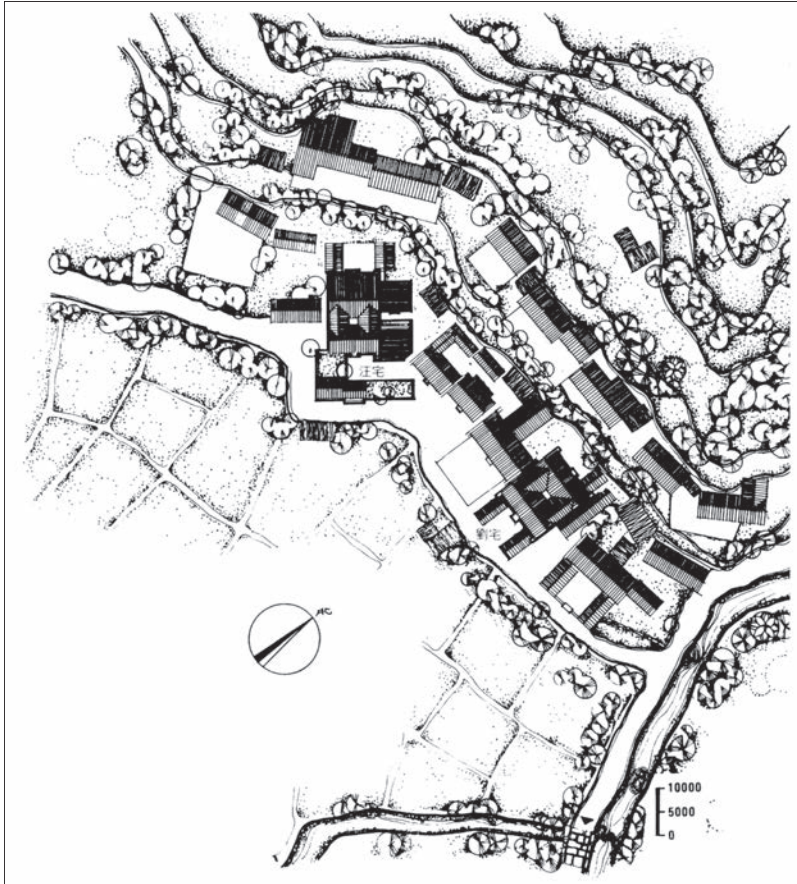
Neighborhood Site Design

“Architecture is a social act and the material theater of human activity.”

Spiro Kostof

Of course, the design of the home itself is of great importance, but the site design concepts ultimately make the biggest difference to the long-term success of a community-enhanced neighborhood. For example, “two hands clapping” means a high-functioning community, where houses face each other and are about 20 feet apart, in contrast with typical neighborhoods where houses are 100–150 feet from doorknob to doorknob, creating a street of anonymity.

When a site has the space, the one-to-three-story scenario is generally the least expensive way to build and to keep construction costs down, and 10–30 units per acre is usually the least costly density to build at if you include site work. However, if the site is small or expensive (or both), it’s common to reach 80 units per acre. This can be even denser if the development is associated with other uses, such as other private houses or commercial use. There are certainly high-functioning one-building neighborhoods around the world. I have met plenty of folks from Chicago who talk about five-story walk-up flats where semi-private rear decks connect each floor. Definitely they have a storied sense of community—I have visited many of them and can testify to it. I could see it, feel it, it’s palpable, but it’s hard to replicate. Then, there is a cohousing community in Gothenburg, Sweden, which is a ten-story building retrofit of a 40-unit rental project that was in need of major repair. The group bought the building and turned the fourth floor into the common house; converted the bottom floor into a utility common area with mailboxes, childcare, and a workshop; and refurbished the 32 apartments into ownership units. From a design point of view, the common house on



SITE DESIGN

If the site has any land at all (2 acres or more), the site plan often evolves toward the form of an ancient Chinese village when choosing to build a community. It flows along the topographic lines marrying the people, the land, and in this case, the farm.

In the 55 cohousing communities and 100 affordable housing projects that we have designed, no one has ever asked for anything like this. Driving down that road, you could imagine a lonely and forlorn senior every 12th house in front of a TV, and a lonely and unhappy child every 10th house plugged into their Nintendo device. It's car-predominant (and therefore dangerous), atomized, and estranged. Inefficient both environmentally and socially.



the fourth floor had to be designed to be attractive—the same is true of the common area on the first floor and the landscaped area around the building. This type of project is completely plausible and we have designed a number of similar projects, including a four-story 19-unit project on 0.24 acres (80 units per acre density) with a 3,500-square-foot common area and a 30-unit project on 0.9 acres with a 4,000-square-foot common area. This dig-deep programming has everything to do with reaching real goals and nothing to do with rear-view mirror thinking, other than the values and experience that you bring to the table. This dig deep programming has everything to do with finding the target and hitting it, finding the problem and solving it. That's the essence of the book titled, *Problem Seeking: An Architectural Programming Primer*, first written in the 1950s by William Peña, which is still



VEHICLES AFFECT SITE DESIGN

Small, often shared, electric vehicles to get you to the nearest neighborhood center for groceries. This is how you meet the parking requirements without miles and miles of asphalt, as occurs in one American town after another.

Sharing is the new having. In other words, without sharing, you often don't have something. The holistic way of imagining high-functioning neighborhoods is individuals having practical advantages that benefit the entire community. If you can share cars, for example, you can have less asphalt, less consumed land, less concrete, and less costs. The Cohousing Company designed a 31-unit project a couple of years ago that had 31 parking spots and 4 shared cars. It was required to have 2 parking spots per unit, or 62 parking spots in total, but sharing 4 cars dispensed with that requirement for this project.



MUIR COMMONS SITE PLAN

It's easy to see why there is so much child-to-parent activity in Muir Commons from the site plan alone. It feels like a village. Muir Commons—the first cohousing community in the U.S.—started in 1989 and finished in 1991.

one of the best books on the topic.¹ Why try to solve any problem without fully understanding it? Dig deep programming generates hundreds of design criteria (see Chapter 2). That's what moves a culture forward. Many cohousing common houses in North America receive less than 100 people-hours a week. Spending \$500,000 for less than 100 people-hours per week is not worth it, yet that sum of money for 450 people-hours a week is well worth it because it also improves how your house works and that's where you save.

And this dig deep programming (cultural change, or at least a cultural pivot) has nothing to do with prejudices, pop magazines, Pinterest, Facebook, or the flavor *du jour*. It has everything to do with the question of "Who do we really want to be?," at least in the context of land-use and neighborhoods.

This is what cohousing groups strive for and why architects design multi-family housing to deliver sustainability to the greatest extent feasible and to promote diversity best. It's all about moving closer to where you want to be, as fast as you can, at least compared to where you used to be.

NOTE

1. William Peña and Steven A. Parshall, *Problem Seeking: An Architectural Programming Primer*, 5th edition (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012).

MUIR COMMONS, CA

It's easy to make something that works for all the kids—"our gang." And of course, there is a sense of accomplishment when you make a bridge that lets everyone get around. Not all site projects have to be bought and built at move-in. These kids (with the help of a parent) built this project after move-in.

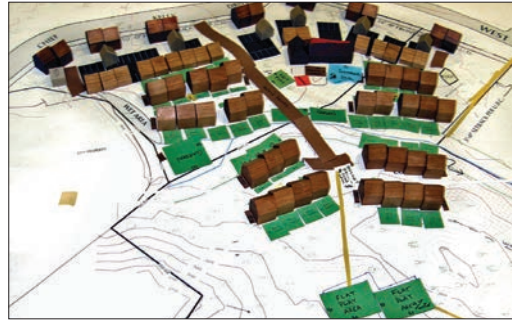
**MUIR COMMONS, CA**

Fire pits are fun, and they bring the whole neighborhood together. Breaking bread together, sitting around the fire, working together for tasks like a mini barn raising—this is life in a socially and physically well-designed neighborhood.





NEVADA CITY, CA
Working it, then reworking it.



NEVADA CITY, CA

The house blocks laid out after two days of programming and establishing criteria.



NEVADA CITY, CA

When people are outside of their house (but still on their property) in regular suburban neighborhoods, they are in their front yard about 20 percent of the time and in the backyard the other 80 percent of the time. In high-functioning neighborhoods, it's the other way around, 80 percent on the front porch, and 20 percent in the back.

Something happens when you know and care about your neighbor. You want to stay connected and see how they are doing.



NEVADA CITY, CA

One of the mechanisms to get the new houses to half of the average house price in Nevada City was to sell off seven lots at the north periphery of the interface of the site and the street. Each of the lots had an extra ADU unit, meaning the project sold off a total of 14 other units. This also kept the cohousing from getting too large and therefore too difficult to manage by consensus. In the end, 3.5 acres went to cohousing, 1.5 acres went to the seven lots that were sold, and 6 acres are left as open space. In the final four days of site planning, as the group came to grips with the economics and social performance of less spread-out houses, it was decided to leave 6 acres of open space and to use an acre of that for a vegetable garden.

The private house porches add a friendly interface to the street, which is much better than seeing the rear end of 50 cars, even if some of them are electric.

NEVADA CITY, CA

A spontaneous lifestyle is a commonly stated goal in high-functioning neighborhoods. On the left, Victoria is texting her boyfriend to let him know that she's joining her three neighbors going to the movies this Sunday evening. The movies aren't a big deal, but parents talking about childrearing, elders talking about aging successfully, and people discussing and solving the myriad of issues in life are what makes a high-functioning neighborhood a great neighborhood. . . and sometimes going to the movie with friends.



NEVADA CITY, CA

Meg (to the right) was encouraged to move to the closest house to the parking by her kids, after all, she was 89 when she moved in—just a few dozen feet from her home. Then, one day, she moved to the house farthest from the parking, about seven-hundred feet away. I queried her one day—"Meg, why?" She said that she relied on her relationships with her neighbors much more than she did on her automobile. Seven-hundred feet away meant that she saw more of them on her way home every day. Meg passed away three weeks before her 100th birthday.

NEVADA CITY, CA

This is the point of community-enhanced design. The residents are talking about the issues of the day and helping each other out when it makes sense. The people are the picture, the buildings are the picture frame.



NEVADA CITY, CA

Site plans in community-enhanced neighborhoods make this activity easy and natural.



NEVADA CITY, CA

Community-enhanced design is a 100 percent pedestrian neighborhood. People walk from a central parking area to their housing elsewhere. We have become conditioned to have our vehicles practically enter our bedrooms, but those who can use a pull wagon or a wheelchair live a much richer life. Those who want to live next to the parking can do that.



NEVADA CITY, CA

This is exactly what this neighborhood was designed to do—to create a life and a pulse between the buildings