



# Exploring cohousing in Portland, Oregon:

*A brief synopsis of an ethnographic study on intentional community making*

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**(DRAFT: WORK IN PROGRESS)**

The notion of leaving your door unlocked and walking out into an expanse of communal space populated by non-kin, remains startling incongruous with the way of life I've always known. Perhaps this stimulated my interest in this area; the way in which cohousing communities challenge the isolated, nuclear family model. Growing up in urbanised areas throughout my childhood with separated parents with full time jobs, meant that our house was largely empty growing up. Envisioning a home that extended to non-family members intrigued me. In particular, the tangibility of community as both a structurally and socially engineered product captured my interest. To learn more about this concept I travelled to Portland, Oregon – an area densely populated with cohousing communities. Before delving into my findings, I will first introduce the fundamental characteristics of this community living model, and why I feel it warrants our interest.

## ***What is co-housing?***

Co-housing is an increasingly popular form of intentional living that occupies a strong presence in the Pacific Northwest of the US. Typically, a cohousing community consists of single units organised around a shared and open plan space in which residents work and on occasion, eat together as a form of intentional communal living. This community model can be traced back to 1960s Denmark, which you can read more about [here](#). By championing egalitarian social structures with a distinct focus on environmentalism, cohousing can be understood as a counter narrative to

the dominant ideology of consumption, materialism and individualism. Small-scale units appear at odds with the overarching narrative of home ownership of the big grand house, typifying the American dream.

**Intentional communities reinvent the home, the family and the community.** What sets cohousing communities apart from other place-based communities such as gated communities is the way in which they are *both* socially and physically defined. Structure in this context thrives with an independence of the physical characteristics of the build, as structure is embedded socially in the form of communal activities and practices. Arguably an exhausted concept in academia, belonging possesses a somewhat ubiquitous status that despite its prevalence, still remains notoriously hard to define. What remains interesting about the growing popularity and predominance of cohousing is the way in which belonging in this context, is not treated as a by-product but as a point of departure. As something that's so heavily engineered and premeditated begs the question of not just its authenticity, but also its likelihood to survive and thrive in an increasingly individualistic society. As a premise for my research, the question of whether belonging was at all attainable through this premeditated and intentional method of community making and practice captured my interest. I felt compelled towards investigating the capacity of shared practice as a driving force in securing bonds that transcended blood ties and relations. To achieve this, I observed and studied the multitude of practices and rituals, which constituted the colourful and dynamic mosaic of activity, which informed everyday life at Willow Creek cohousing community. I oriented this study by investigating the everyday practices and rituals present at Willow Creek cohousing community in Portland.

### **My study: Willow Creek**



Up in the hills just North-West of Portland, Oregon, lies Willow Creek; a self

governed multi- generational cohousing community. Nestled amongst 4-acres of forested terrain, enveloped in a sea of evergreen fir trees, and home to over 40 adults and children who live, work, and eat together – Willow Creek is not your typical American home. Instead of housing one nuclear family, Willow Creek houses multiple residents of all ages, occupations, and backgrounds, united by a shared endeavour to build community. Where we live, eat, work, and socialise has a significant impact upon the self, our relationships, and our livelihoods. Cohousing communities like Willow Creek emerge as unique cases in which these domains of sociality intersect.

Studying community can be a somewhat vague and ambiguous conquest, yielding little clarity with its multifarious definitions and interpretations. Certainly a modern understanding of communities negates the understanding of “always on” culture/epidemic (choose as you wish), spurred on by the ubiquity of public and social forms of communication, community transcends distance and the barriers that very much functioned to dictate social engagement. By distinguishing between the rhetoric and practice, my study dismantled the common misconceptions surrounding the study of intentional communities and the inherent bias propagated by the media. I considered this to be an important distinction as it highlights the gap between ideals and reality, of what people say and what people do. I wanted to tease out the contention that lingered, somewhat awkwardly, in the gap between the two. This binary takes on many forms, from aspiration and reality, to pragmatism and idealism – on one level we interact and engage with such binaries through other domains of life. Few cases encompass this binary so completely as intentional community building.